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EXPLORING THE DIDACTIC POSSIBILITIES OF THE TEACHINGS OF THE THREE TAOIST CLASSICS

EXPLORANDO LAS POSIBILIDADES DIDÁCTICAS DE LAS ENSEÑANZAS DE LOS TRES CLÁSICOS TAOÍSTAS

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Abstract

Educational Taoism (*daojia*) is one of the oldest pedagogies in history. Based on the teachings of the Chinese masters Lao Zi, Lie Zi and Zhuang Zi, it is not well known in Western education. Nor is it familiar to specialists in Pedagogy or General Didactics. The aim of this study is to explore its potential for the education of students, from the perspective of teachers. For this purpose, 33 Western and Chinese teachers were interviewed

using a phenomenographic approach. The results of their testimonies suggest that educational Taoism improves students' education in a profound way, complementary to conventional education. The educational scope of tao *daojia* goes beyond disciplinary understanding and competency education. It actualizes fundamental constructs, such as the human ego, human consciousness and essential self-knowledge. The study opens up new lines of research and training and reveals numerous benefits for the

education of students and thus for the future of society as a whole.

Keywords: Development of education, Taoism, student, consciousness, Pedagogy, Didactics

Resumen

El taoísmo educativo (*daojia*) es una de las pedagogías más antiguas de la Historia. Basado en las enseñanzas de los maestros chinos Lao Zi, Lie Zi y Zhuang Zi, no es muy conocido en la educación occidental. Tampoco resulta familiar a especialistas en Pedagogía o Didáctica General. El objetivo de este estudio es explorar su potencial para la educación de los estudiantes, desde la perspectiva de los docentes. Para ello, se entrevistó con un enfoque fenomenográfico a 33 profesores occidentales y chinos. Los resultados de sus testimonios sugieren que el taoísmo educativo mejora la educación de los estudiantes de una manera profunda, complementaria a la educación convencional. El alcance educativo del tao *daojia* va más allá de la comprensión disciplinar y de la educación competencial. Actualiza constructos fundamentales, como el ego humano, la conciencia humana y el autoconocimiento esencial. El estudio abre nuevas líneas de investigación y formación y revela numerosos beneficios para la educación de los estudiantes y, por tanto, para el futuro de la sociedad en su conjunto.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo de la educación, taoísmo, estudiante, conciencia, Pedagogía, Didáctica

Introduction

China's importance in the world is clear. It is the most populous country on the planet, with twice as many inhabitants as Europe. It was the world's leading economy until the 19th century (Rojo, 2022), and may well regain this position in the coming years (Balze, 2019; Romero-Wimer, & Fernández-Hellmund, 2021). Despite

its objective importance, however, Eurocentrism and Western-led globalization have not favored an in-depth understanding of traditional Chinese education. Nevertheless, in light of its long history, classical Chinese education may have much in common with hegemonic Western forms of education. One particularly fruitful way of approaching the Chinese tradition would be through Pedagogy and General Didactics, from the Central European epistemological perspective (Runge, 2013), despite the 20 centuries or more separating Lao Tzu (6th century BC) from Ratke (1571-1635) and Comenius (1592-1670).

Chinese culture and education are mainly based on Taoism and Confucianism (Maillard, 1995). Each of these belief systems is divided into two branches: one educational and the other religious. Thus, a distinction is made between educational Taoism (*daojia*, 道家) and religious Taoism (*daojiao*, 道教), and between educational Confucianism (*rujia*, 儒家) and religious Confucianism (*rujiao*, 儒教). Both approaches have influenced thought, citizenship and education in China and its international sphere of influence. Despite their quite distinct educational orientations (Shao, 2005), the two systems have prevailed over the centuries in a position of mutual contrast and complementarity, as a double tradition. The synthesis of the teachings of Lao Zi and Confucius lies in a historical encounter between the two: "When the young Confucius meets Lao Zi, he tells his disciples that he 'has met a dragon'" (Schindler, 1991). Despite their incomparable depth, the educational potential of Taoist teachings has been neglected since the Han dynasty (汉), i.e., since 206 BC (Chen, 2008; Yang, 2019; Xiong & Ju, 2022).

This article focuses exclusively on educational Taoism or *daojia* (道家), which dates back more than 3,000 years (Heider, 1985). According to Russell (2020), *daojia* Taoism is not a religion; yet

neither is it a philosophy in the Western sense. Herrán (2014) termed it a “radical pedagogy”, since it seeks to educate people for a more conscious life. The corpus of educational Taoism and Taoist teachings is attributed to the legacy of three Chinese pedagogues and educators: the Master, Lao Zi (2012) and his two brilliant disciples Lie Zi (1987) and Zhuang Zi (1996). Their eponymous books, the *Lao Zi* or *Tao Te Ching* (2012), the *Lie Zi* (1987) and the *Zhuang Zi* (1996) are valuable sources of their wisdom and teachings and of the educational principles they argued for. In them, the influence of two other texts is acknowledged: the *I Ching* (Yijing, 易经), or *Book of Changes/Mutations* (10th century BC; Wilhelm, 1924), and the *Neiye* (from *nei*, 内, “inner”, and *ye*, 业, “work, cultivation”), ca. 350-300 B.C. (Kirkland, 2008, p.942), perhaps the first meditation manual in history, which particularly influenced Zhuang Zi (1996).

Educational Taoism (*daojia*) is based on the symbol of tai chi (*taiji*, 太极) and the eight trigrams (*bagua*, 八卦). Tai chi embraces the dialectic of yin (阴) and yang (阳). The eight trigrams represent heaven (*tian*, 天), earth (*di*, 地), wind (*feng*, 风), lightning (*lei*, 雷), water (*shui*, 水), fire (*huo*, 火), mountain (*shan*, 山), swamp (*ze*, 泽) symbolizing the ten thousand beings (of the world) (*wanwu*, 万物). Tai chi (*taiji*, 太极), an ancient teaching resource, is the core of Taoism

(FIGURE I. Taiji and Bagua)



This symbol represents the universe, its nature, its beings, its changes and the apparent duality of phenomena. For Schindler (1991), it synthesizes

both the supreme concept of the Tao and the whole of Taoist wisdom. It is included in the *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes* or *Mutations* (10th century B.C.), prefaced by Jung and translated by Wilhelm (1924). It consists of a circle with a light side, yang (阳), representing activity, expansion and freedom; and a dark side, yin (阴), representing receptivity, contraction and restriction (Schindler, 1991). These are divided by a S-shaped figure that both unites and separates them. Tai chi teaches that both polarities need and complement each other, define and include each other, and are in constant reciprocal movement (Dang, 2023). From an educational perspective, this shows us that duality, which Dewey (1910) observed as a characteristic of the human being, is surmountable (Huang, 2010).

The epistemology of education espoused by the Taoist classics is very different from today's conventional forms. The current globalized, hegemonic form of education is Western, regulated by national and international educational systems and implemented under the guidelines of international educational bodies. This form of schooling is similar in all nations in terms of its epistemology, major objectives and predominant pedagogical fields. One example is inclusive education, as Usarralde (2020) remarks. Contemporary education revolves around meaningful and relevant learning, which is seen as the means to achieve knowledge (e.g., Bransford et al., 2000; Díaz Barriga, 2010; UNESCO, 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Ferreyra & Pedrazzi, 2007); and deep, lifelong learning (Quinn et al., 2019; European Commission, 2019) are its preferred forms. It therefore builds on the acquisition and development of knowledge, competences and values among learners.

For Taoist teachers, these pedagogical principles represent “lower virtue” or “lower *te*” (*xiade*, 下德). *Daojia* educational Taoism strongly dismisses the notion of “learning”, thereby taking up a

position that is at odds with Confucians and most Westerners (Xiong & Ju, 2022). It does not deny the importance of learning to achieve knowledge, but calls into question the validity of intellectual knowledge, which it sees as cumbersome, limited, rigid and dualistic, opposing it to the value of attaining enlightenment (*ming* 明; Zhuang Zi). Thus, from the standpoint of the Taoist teachings, learning-based education occupies an intermediate position between ignorance and virtue, or higher *te* (*shangde*, 上德). At more advanced and deeper levels of education, learning is not seen as useful, as it does not truly help us become more conscious. This is why, in chapter XLVII of the *Tao Te Ching*, we read: “The further one goes, the less one learns” (Lao Zi, 2012). “Higher virtue”, or higher *te*, is a deep, unconscious virtue, distinct from public values or virtues (Camps, 1996), which are necessary for a participatory life based on social ethics. The superficial moral education of the lower *te* is contrasted with education on the basis of and striving for higher *te*, which represents an education in awareness whose goal is to develop consciousness.

According to the teachings of the Tao *dao*, every human being has an innate, pure, simple, beautiful nature at birth, and this should be preserved. This is *ziran* (自然). It is symbolized by Lao Zi’s (2012) “state of the newborn child” or “state of the uncut block” (Xu et al., 2023). Education should not violate students’ *ziran*; it should not infringe on their pure and original nature. Deep respect for the learner is the first didactic base and consequence of any educational relationship. When this innate nature is lost, desires emerge and the essential being loses sight of itself. This perspective is compatible with Rousseau’s (1987) pedagogy, although more developed. Tao-based education (Xiong & Ju, 2022) assumes that children, like all human beings, tend to naturally guide themselves and achieve fulfillment in harmony with the rest of the world.

The education of the Tao masters prioritizes attention to the inner self. It is the prelude to self-education based on *ziran* and oriented towards the higher *te*. How can we educate ourselves? First, with the guidance of a conscious teacher. Secondly, by following the Tao (道) as a path of consciousness. Learning knowledge and skills alone does not lead to that path, although the student does not stop developing and accumulating reasons, questions and answers. This is why Lao Zi (2012) says: “Whoever devotes himself to study grows day by day. He who follows the Tao, diminishes day by day. It wanes and wanes until it reaches non-acting, and since it does not act, nothing is left undone” (p. 239). An education based on learning and knowledge does not lead to “enlightenment” (*ming*, 明; Zhuang Zi, 1996) or to a state of full awakening equivalent to the Buddhist *satori* or Hindu *samadhi*, a “state of consciousness” (Herrán, 2006) that is not only far distant from the hegemonic form of education but actively excluded from it.

The best way to educate people is to consciously refrain from action (*wuwei*, 无为). Non-acting means following the Tao of nature (or of the ten thousand beings). The Tao (道) is the core of the Taoist teachings. It is simple and can be intuited as both the origin of the universe and the law inherent in the development and transformation of the ten thousand beings or of nature itself. It is the inexhaustible motor of life and the reason for all beings thriving in harmony. The creative and vital force of the Tao is *qi* (气). Translated by Culham and Lin (2020) as “vital energy”, this is another fundamental concept of Taoist teachings. The universe, nature and all beings have *qi* in greater or lesser quantities and concentrations. The body, mind, heart and spirit are connected by *qi* (Culham & Lin, 2020). The *qi* of the newborn child is concentrated and full in terms of higher *te* (Xu et al., 2023). The Taoist masters stress the importance of an education aimed at “mastering vital energy” (*zhuan qi* 专

气; Lao Zi, 2012), or safeguarding the purity and untrammelled flow of *qi*.

The *dao* Taoist educational tradition, influenced by the classical text *Neiye*, developed meditative practices (*xiulian*) such as tai chi chuan, kung fu, qi gong (or chi kung), meditation (*mingxiang*), etc., all of which aim to enhance *qi*. For this reason, *xiulian* practices include a wide range of breathing exercises, body movements and meditative techniques with the intention of increasing *qi* in the body and mind and keeping it flowing freely and harmoniously. *Qi*-enhancing meditative practices consider the spirit (*shen*, 神). This can be divided into two types: the one possessed at birth (*xiantian*, 先天) and the one that arises later (*houtian*, 后天). The first, the original spirit (*yuanshen*, 元神), is the essence of *qi*. The second, the cognitive spirit (*shishen*, 识神), relates to the cognitive, sensory capacity and desires of human beings. Taoist *xiulian* practices are also designed to reconnect with the original spirit by controlling the breath and the flow of *qi*. The evolution of consciousness and the flow of *qi* require the control and loss of the ego or self. This essentially coincides with the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the 28th Buddha, according to the Theravada tradition. All Taoist meditative practices are beneficial for teachers' self-education, and then for the education of students (Herrán & Xu, 2024).

Tao-based education relies on internalization, inner cultivation, non-judgmental observation of phenomena, enlightenment, emptiness, silence, absence of the mind and loss of self. Its development requires the guidance of the outer teacher, who can awaken the disciple and inner teacher (Dürckheim, 1982). It cultivates attunement to life and harmony with nature. Its basis is the awareness of our intimate connection and oneness with nature, through which "heaven and man become one" (*tian ren he yi*, 天人合一). Thus the teachings of the Taoist classics provide the foundations for the education of a person

who will be attuned to and united with nature (Yang, 2019; Yu & Sun, 2020; Kamola, 2021), understood as both inner and outer nature. The Tao flows from attunement with external and internal nature, which for students means not acting, and respecting their *ziran* so that they can safeguard and cultivate their higher *te* and *qi* (life energy).

In view of the above, the aim of this article is to explore the potential for students' education of the teachings of the three Taoist classics.

Method

Design

In order to address the above objective, we adopted a phenomenographic method (Murillo et al., 2022), which aims to gain access to the whole range of participants' perceptions, concepts and understandings of the phenomenon under study (Marton, 1981). Due to the direct relationship between concepts and acts (Moyano-Díaz, 2016), this enabled us to explore, from the participants' point of view, the importance of the teachings of the Taoist classics for their students' education. To ensure a varied range of concepts, 33 Western and Chinese teachers, with differing backgrounds, cultures, education, professional experience and knowledge of the Tao, were selected.

To gather data, semi-structured interviews were conducted, structured by a script validated by five experts in education research. The script included fragments of the Taoist classics selected for their potential to encourage a dialogue through which interviewer and interviewees could jointly construct knowledge (Alonso, 1994). The script was adjusted to participants' specific characteristics, with three versions: in Spanish, in Chinese, and for teachers of Taoist practices.

Participants

The participants were 33 teachers, of whom 23 were female (69.7%) and ten male (30.3%), divided into three groups according to their demographic features: Chinese, Western and Taoist (Table 1):

TABLE I. Profiles of the participating teachers

Groups	Nationality /Number	Age (years)	Level of education	Teacher experience (years)
Chinese teachers	China/6	Between 27-48	2 Primary school 2 Secondary 2 University	Between 2-23
Western teachers	Spanish/17 Chilean/1 Peruvian/1 Paraguayan/1 Cuban/1	Between 36-67	5 Primary school 9 Secondary 8 University	Between 10-40
Taoist teachers	Italian/1 Spanish/5	Between 49-69	Taoist meditative practices	Between 6-30 (Between 26-41 years of practice of Taoism)

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the organizing university. To ensure participants' anonymity, each was assigned a label combining letters and numbers. Western primary, secondary and university teachers, regardless of nationality, were labelled MPO, MSO and MUO respectively; Chinese primary, secondary and university teachers were labelled MPC, MSC and MUC respectively; while Taoist teachers were labelled MT. These letters were then appended with a number assigned to each participant according to the order of interviews.

Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis was chosen in order to interpret the manifest content of the interviews and explore their latent content (Abela, 2008). Also, Jaccard's similarity index (Ij) was used to explore the concurrence of codes. For the data analysis, first the interviews were transcribed, and subsequently the system of categories was established by combining deductive and inductive methods (Bisquerra, 2014) using Nvivo 12 software. The deductive categories were: "Development of students' awareness" and "Development of students' personal virtues and social attitudes and values". The inductive category was "Health benefits for students".

Results and discussion

The analysis was divided into three categories with different codes, as follows:

1 Development of students' awareness

A clear benefit of the Tao teachings is the development of students' self-awareness, which was the most highlighted code in all three groups (nine citations). MSO-7 stated: "I think the idea of the Tao is great. I think it would be good to bring it into the education system as well", adding: "because it can really help people to find that spark inside, to start up the engine that awakens them, to dive inwards and really try to find their deep essence". In short, the Tao could help to find "what is really your deep essence", because "we are more than this external physical body and what we see" (MSO-7). This view aligns with one of the most basic principles of Quantum Mechanics, namely, that the essential structural element of the universe is not matter, but energy-vibration (Broglie, 1925). This universal energy principle coincides with the Taoist *qi*. The self-knowledge fostered by the Tao therefore differs from that arising as a response to self-analysis, self-concept, self-image, personality, emotions, knowledge and existential identity (Herrán, 2004, 2014). In other words, far from being the response to the question, "What am I like?" asked by psychology and psychiatry, it instead differentiates between existential and essential self-knowledge and addresses the question: "Who am I essentially or deeply?" or "What is my real identity, my true self?" (Herrán, 2014, p. 228). Essential self-knowledge, then, develops enhanced awareness and attunement to the environment: "There's nothing better than knowing yourself and learning to tune in to the environment" (MT-2).

Further, these factors also help the growth of students' self-awareness, including awareness of energy, the body, mind and emotions, correlating with each other at $lj=1$. Physical awareness was

a code that appeared only among Chinese and Taoist teachers, whose opinion was that it is the first step towards to self-knowledge: "Self-knowledge begins with the knowledge of your own body and your own existence" (MUC-1).

Another major contribution of the Taoist teachings is the awareness of nature (six citations), which appeared frequently, correlating with the awareness of oneness with nature (five citations) at $lj=1$. In this sense, MUO-6 affirmed: "They're not two different things. Human beings are part of nature, that's why we are nature. So it's logical to educate people about this idea, I think it's essential"; adding: "because it's the only way we can respect the environment, respect others" (MUO-6). From another angle: "When you understand that the human body, the environment, the human being and the universe form a unity, you understand the need for the world we live in to cultivate this harmony" (MT-3). The harmony between human beings and nature (*tian ren he yi*, 天人合一) contrasts with a society that violates the environment and exploits it for its own self-centered interests, without seeing it with sufficient awareness. As a result, environmental problems are becoming more serious every day. The classical Taoist teachings teach us something older, comparable to the original peoples' holistic understanding of nature as a living being (Huntington, 2000). Thus MSO-7 stated that nature "is a unity, absolutely. And everything is alive. The problem is in believing that the only living things are us and the animals. But everything in nature is alive and it's wonderful, when you really feel the life in it" (MSO-7). In Taoist teachings, human beings are not separate from nature, and, above all: "We are not above nature" (MSO-6). To solve serious environmental problems, environmental education based on the consequences of the destruction of nature can be partially effective, but it is not a radical solution (Yang et al., 2019). Hence, participants recognized the need for and significance of seeking empathy and harmony

with nature: “Even almost feeling pain when a tree is cut down. Because you start to think, after it’s worked so hard to grow for so many years, for them to come and cut it down in a few minutes, that’s sad” (MUO-2). The nature (*ziran*) of *dao* is different from the modern Western concept, which is based on the contraposition of the natural world and the human being. In contrast, Taoism is a concept based on their intrinsic and defining unity. Through the development of their awareness of nature and unity, students’ awareness of their surroundings and of others is also increased: “Seeking knowledge from nature also helps students to begin to observe and feel their surroundings” (MSC-1).

Increased awareness of nature and of oneness with nature can lead learners to self-knowledge, the discovery of their essential selves, and vice-versa. MSO-7 affirmed: “If we sever the link with nature and cease to live in harmony with it, it’ll become more difficult for life on the planet to happen. It’ll also be difficult for us to find our authentic nature, because everything is unity.” This teacher argued that the awareness that nature is a living unity brings about “that harmony with it that helps your inner harmony and helps you find the center and develop that spark” (MSO-7). Culham and Lin (2020) also affirm this link between feeling the *qi* of nature and resonating in harmony with it as the key to cultivating virtue and enlightenment. Participants also stressed that awareness of nature is useful for nourishing *qi*; i.e., for the development of energy awareness: “Seeking harmony with nature is also nourishing life, vital energy (*qi*)” (MPC-1). The three correlated with each other at $I_j=1$. Energy awareness also facilitates body awareness, due to the close relationship between body, mind and *qi*.

Another great benefit of Taoist teachings is the broadening of the awareness of life: MSO-3, for example, asked: “How do we deal with life? how do we deal with everyday life? how do we deal

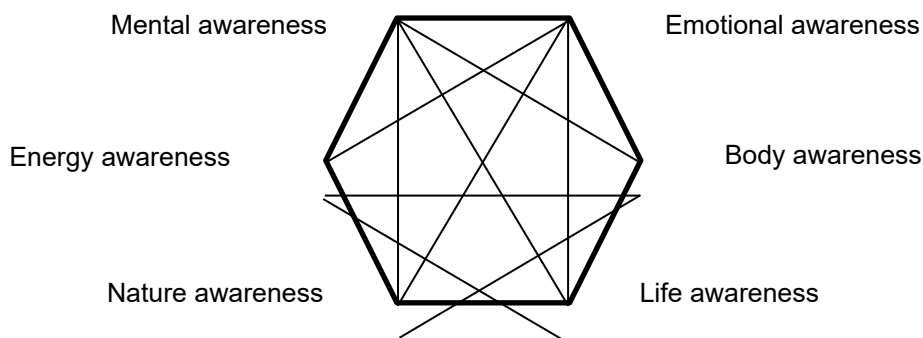
with the prospect of death?” Interviewees noted the importance of death for a more conscious life: “[...] because the meaning of death is to make our students more aware of the importance of death. When we discover the importance of death, we can strive for a fuller and more positive life” (MUC-1). In this sense, Rodríguez et al. (2015) agree on the importance of “educating with death in mind for a more conscious life”. Full life awareness requires being aware in the present. Thus MSO-8 urged that: “In addition to competences for our students, they should learn to be fully present in the world, with an open mind”; calling, in other words, for the ability to be in the “here and now”, as expressed in the expressions from the Ancient Greek (*Εἶδω και τώρα*) and Latin (*hic et nunc*). We need to live in the now rather than in the past or future, which do not exist in the present moment. In terms of the consciousness of life, we live and die at every moment (biologically and on a cellular level). Therefore, life-consciousness helps us to become truly aware of and enjoy life.

In interviewees’ responses, the awareness of energy, the body, the mind, the emotions, life and nature were found to be closely related, correlating with each other at $I_j=1$ (Table 2). These are shown in Figure 2 below:

TABLE II. Correlations between codes. Development of students' awareness

Category	Code A	Code B	Ij
Development of students' awareness	Nature awareness	Awareness of unity	1
	Nature awareness	Body awareness	1
	Emotional awareness	Body awareness	1
	Energy awareness	Body awareness	1
	Mental awareness	Body awareness	1
	Life awareness	Body awareness	1
	Emotional awareness	Nature awareness	1
	Mental awareness	Nature awareness	1
	Energy awareness	Nature awareness	1
	Life awareness	Nature awareness	1
	Energy awareness	Emotional awareness	1
	Mental awareness	Emotional awareness	1
	Life awareness	Emotional awareness	1
	Mental awareness	Energy awareness	1
	Life awareness	Energy awareness	1
Life awareness	Mental awareness	1	
Nature awareness	Nourishment of vital energy	1	

FIGURE II. Relationships between energetic, bodily, mental, emotional, vital awareness and nature awareness.



2 Development of students' personal virtues and social attitudes and values

According to our findings, participants saw Taoist teachings as favoring the development of functional and competence-based social attitudes and values in addition to students' personal virtues. Among the former they identified conflict resolution; communication and decision-making skills; understanding of complex situations; capacity for abstraction; critical thinking; functional creativity (fluency, flexibility, originality, development, problem solving, etc.); emotional competences; reflection; active listening; social respect; responsibility; equity; inclusion; existential self-awareness; etc. All of these are necessary for the overall, comprehensive development of students and society. However, the Taoist teachings were also said to foster virtues relating to the development of consciousness: love (as opposed to self-centeredness); complexity of consciousness; open-mindedness; acceptance; reflection (greater lucidity); empathy; inner creativity (relating to one's own being); humility; internalization; introspection; maturity; moderation; sensitivity towards nature and others; distancing; disidentification; deconditioning; separation from things; observation (meditative, non-judgmental); enquiry; non-violence; non-action; waiting; keeping still (stopping in the face of events); silence; halting the mind; stillness; self-balance; kindness; compassion; deep respect; magnanimity; compassion; care (for nature and others); detachment; destruction or elimination; essential self-knowledge; etc. These virtues can be at the same time the paths towards, the means of attaining, and the results of the evolution of consciousness (Herrán, 2004).

Creativity is important due to its twofold nature as a functional social value and as a personal virtue. The creativity favored by the Tao is "total creativity" (Herrán, 2000), as this is both external and internal (relating to one's own being). External

creativity is aimed at discovery, advancement, problem-solving, production, innovation, etc. and applied to external objects; whereas internal creativity is oriented more towards building or developing the self through increased awareness, loss of ego and inner growth. In other words, the former involves creating *things* while the latter involves creating *oneself*; and Taoist teachings nurture both these facets. In external terms, Taoism facilitates students' flow and flexibility, based on the observation of nature: "Taking nature as a source of knowledge. This kind of nature-connected education is a flexible, discreet, humble, observant education" (MSO-8). These are indispensable factors for enhancing external creativity. The same teacher added, linking flow with detachment: "I think it has a lot of applications in developing creativity (flow), by detaching ourselves from a lot of things so that we can get access to new things, so that we can innovate, change, transform and transform ourselves" (MSO-8). To evolve inwardly, one must first unlearn conditioning and jettison much ballast, and this is achieved through inner creativity. The teachings of the Tao encourage the emergence of this conscious emptiness, this higher state of consciousness that is the keystone of the renewal of being based on profound innovation, for a true change of life from within oneself.

Some of the virtues fostered by Taoism are uncommon in the West, although they are radically linked to the development of other personal virtues in education. For example, participants recognized the importance of stopping and not acting in today's fast-paced society: "When you have something that worries you a lot, that comes to you unexpectedly, don't act, stop, observe it separately from yourself, at a distance. Because if you act quickly, without thinking, you'll probably make a mistake" (MSO-6). Stopping favors students' observation, reflection and capacity for abstraction: "I think this could improve things a lot, and it's what today's

society has lost sight of: stopping and reflecting in a more lucid, calmer way. Not acting because someone is running after you, and you have to go faster” (MPO-5). The same teacher added: “I think it teaches children to reflect better, to open up and to see a world that’s not as concrete as the one we live in every day: this need for everything ‘now’, ‘fast’ and ‘immediate’” (MPO-5). Taoist teachings encourage the observation of the simple: “And, above all, reflecting on the simplest things that are part of our being and that we forget, because life is frenetic” (MPO-5). The basis of the Taoist virtues is that they induce us to observe and inquire not only externally, but also into the deepest parts of the self, based on open-mindedness. Tao teachings encourage detached reflection and observation of the observed: “Taoism can also inspire pupils to observe themselves. This is significant for education” (MPC-2); and MT-5 added: “In the face of such a superficial attitude it’s important for them to learn from introspection.”

Stopping and refraining from action also enable the mind to halt its activity. As a result, students are led towards inner silence, avoiding the incessant chattering of the mind and giving up struggle (the two correlating with each other at $I_j=1$): “Being silent, and not necessarily thinking about anything, although it’s not very easy, but it can be taught. You can have a blank mind, not thinking about anything” (MUO-2). Silence is what today’s students lack: “What I see in the schoolkids, in the little ones, in primary school, is that they don’t pay attention, their attention isn’t focused, so they need that downtime” (MUO-7). Silence helps students to better understand complex situations (the two correlating at $I_j=1$), which aids in conflict resolution. Inner silence and non-struggle allow for flow and acceptance, leading students towards greater happiness: “When we let ourselves flow in life and truly embrace it we can find happiness” (MSO-7).

Regarding happiness, the Chinese teachers related it to students’ freedom and sensitivity, which correlated at $I_j=0.88$ and $I_j=0.98$, respectively. By freedom we do not mean political or moral freedom, but spiritual, inner, pure or unconditioned freedom (Yu & Sun, 2020). This is supported by heightened innate sensitivity (the two correlating at $I_j=0.90$). MUO-6 defined the challenge we face today: “I don’t know where the keys are, but we certainly need to find them. Because the way we’re going produces a lot of unhappiness and suffering”. In terms of this issue, MPC-1 responded: “Spending the days uselessly is a form of non-doing [*wu wei*]. It’s letting people live and feel pure freedom. It’s not doing nothing, but doing nothing utilitarian, or driven by external forces”, adding: “During this time, your senses become acuter” (MPC-1); “You can clearly smell the scent of sunlight moving in the blades of grass, hear the trembling sound of orange-red textured dragonfly wings in the sun, and see the soul of the city awakening in the smoke”. Finally, the same teacher concluded: “Children spend their childhood summers uselessly. They seem to do useless things, but it’s the happiest time of their whole life” (MPC-1). The teaching attitude of “letting people live and feel pure freedom” corresponds to one of the principles of A.S. Neill’s school (1974, 1976).

Children are born with an intense sensitivity to nature, which can be diminished with age. Taoist teachings help to heighten this sensitivity to both nature and their environment, from a foundation of care, greater understanding, empathy, compassion and responsibility towards nature, society and all that surrounds them. Sensitivity correlated with responsibility at $I_j=1$. According to MUO-2: “It also helps us to be more sensitive, more responsible towards everything around us, towards ourselves, and not only towards people”. Sensitivity to nature is also beneficial for the development of creativity. Moreover, when sensitivity is intensified, one also perceives and enjoys the present more; hence the development

of life awareness. Sensitivity applies to both the outside world and oneself; when they are more sensitive to their inner selves, then, students can know themselves in more depth and thus be in closer harmony with themselves. The correlations in this category are shown in Table 3:

TABLE III. Correlations between codes. Development of students' personal virtues and social attitudes and values

Category	Code A	Code B	Ij
Development of students' personal virtues and social attitudes and values	Non-struggle	Understand complex situations	1
	Silence	Understand complex situations	1
	Silence	Non-struggle	1
	Sensitivity	Responsibility	1
	Sensitivity	Happiness	0.98
	Sensitivity	Freedom	0.90
	Freedom	Happiness	0.88

3 Health benefits for students

All three groups of participants acknowledged the contribution of Taoism to students' health. Male testimonies were more positive than female, at a rate of 60% to 40%. Both the Western and Chinese teachers remarked that a major problem in education today is student stress. For MSO-7, one possible cause is an unbalanced approach to teaching: "If only the intellect is nurtured, the intellect that thinks, analyses, criticizes, separates and breaks things down, the students are intellectually overloaded and their nervous system can't cope. That's why there's sometimes so much violence, aggressiveness and tension among adolescents". Alam (2022) argues that contemporary adolescents and young people are struggling with mental health because of stress. Excessive stress can produce negative behavioral, mental and emotional consequences among students: addictions, alcohol, drug or other substance abuse, violence, aggression, frustration, anxiety, etc. Excess is combined with deprivation. MSO-7 asked: "So what happens? There's a tremendous inner emptiness. That's

why they turn to their mobiles or, perhaps, to alcohol or drugs. It's a way of escaping. It's just another illusion." Moreover, escapism and addictions can affect physical and mental health: "Addictions, especially drugs, we already know that they affect the mind, the heart, they affect everything, physical health. And if there's no physical health, there can be no emotional health, no mental health, and vice versa" (MSO-7).

Physical, mental and emotional health correlated to each other at $Ij=1$. Both the Western and Chinese teachers recognized that one of the great contributions of Taoism to students' health was the relaxation resulting from the reduction of stress: "I think that sometimes we all need to stop, so that life passes uselessly. Actually, in these useless moments we can escape from constant stress and feel relaxation and rest" (MPC-1). In agreement with this teacher, MUO-7 added: "I think that nowadays we need this relaxation. Because with technology, our students are overstimulated. Through relaxation, stress and some of its effects, such as feelings of frustration,

violence, aggression, etc., can be reduced. It's about educating, but not to the detriment of the students' emotional, physical and mental health."

The term *qi* (vital energy) appeared in the responses of the Chinese and Taoist teachers in the context of students' health. Its more frequent use by these two groups is due to two reasons. First, *qi* is a concept originating in China, and is key to Taoist (*xiulian*) practices. One purpose of these practices is to maintain the free flow of vital energy (*qi*) in the body through breath and body exercises. MT-3 explained that: "Taoist practices

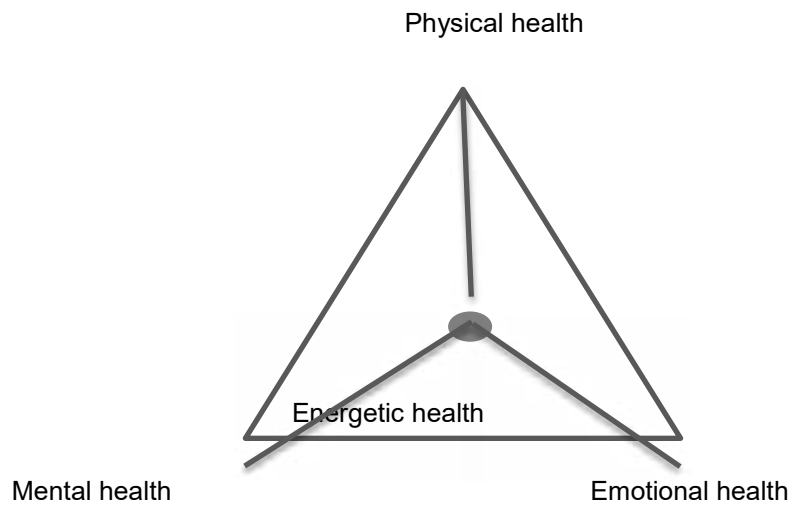
start with self-respect: breath release, free flow of breath-energy (*qi*), release of muscular tensions, etc." These exercises stimulate the free flow of vital energy, the liberation of breathing and the release of muscular tensions, correlating with each other at $I_j=1$. This free and harmonious flow of vital energy (*qi*) also favors good rest and good nutrition, which correlated closely at $I_j=1$. Thus MT-1 stated: "Without a doubt, Taoism has much to contribute to today's education. In all respects: nutrition, rest, health at all levels: physical, energetic, emotional and mental, wellbeing". The correlations between codes are shown in Table 4.

TABLE IV. Correlations between codes. Health benefits for students

Category	Code A	Code B	I_j
Health benefits for students	Physical health	Emotional health	1
	Mental health	Emotional health	1
	Mental health	Physical health	1
	Relaxation	Reducing stress	1
	Breathing release	Muscle tension release	1
	Free flow of vital energy (<i>qi</i>)	Muscle tension release	1
	Free flow of vital energy I (<i>qi</i>)	Breathing release	1
	Nutrition	Rest	1

Thus, it can be seen that the most direct benefit of Taoism is to students' energy and physical health. Furthermore, due to the close relationship between mind, body and vital energy, a clear state of mind can be achieved by controlling the vital energy in the body. For this reason, energy health is fundamental. Maintaining the

smooth circulation of vital energy is essential. In short, the teachings of Tao promote students' health on all levels: energetic, physical, mental and emotional. Their relationships are set out in Figure 3:

FIGURE III. Relationships between energetic, physical, mental and emotional health

Conclusions

Taoist teachings foster the development of all types of awareness among students: of their energy, body, mind, emotions, life and nature. The relationships between these types of awareness and the fundamental role of energy consciousness for developing the others are highlighted by Culham and Lin (2020), in addition to the close link between life awareness and being present in the here and now. Much importance is given to the bond between the awareness of nature and that of oneness with nature (Yang et al., 2019), which also boosts awareness of the environment and of others. The keystone of applied awareness is essential self-knowledge, understood as the response to the question of who we essentially are, which in turn is the source of our consciousness and our relationship to everything else.

Taoist teachings contribute to the development not only of functional and social attitudes and values but also students' personal virtues. On the one hand, Taoism addresses the competencies and the functional and social attitudes and values taught by contemporary education (Escámez et al., 2007): amongst others, conflict resolution, communication and decision-making skills,

understanding of complex situations, the capacity for abstraction, critical thinking, functional creativity, emotional competences, reflection, active listening, social respect, responsibility, equity, inclusion, existential self-knowledge, etc. These are necessary for the comprehensive development of students and society. But they are also compatible with a type of society that is at an adolescent stage, or in the process of maturing and evolving educationally. On the other hand, Taoist teachings also strengthen virtues relating to the development of consciousness, which are extremely important for the education of the person but uncommon in conventional globalized education. These include acceptance, openness, love (as opposed to egocentrism), complexity of consciousness, total creativity, care (for nature and others), detachment, deconditioning, disidentification, destruction or elimination, distancing, empathy, non-action, avoiding struggle, waiting, stopping (in the face of events), silence, halting the mind, stillness, self-balance, kindness, compassion, observation (meditative, non-judgmental), humility, self-inquiry, internalization, introspection, maturity, magnanimity, moderation, reflection (greater lucidity), deep respect, sensitivity (towards nature and others), detachment from things, essential

self-knowledge, etc. These are personal virtues that go much further than educational aims formulated as “key competences” for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2019).

A key contribution of Taoist teachings is their emphasis on nature and the harmony between human beings and nature. An education grounded in nature is more accessible, more experiential and deeper than other approaches based on STEAM (Bati et al., 2018), positive psychology (Alam, 2022), etc. From the standpoint of the subject's unity with nature, environmental education can be developed through a perspective based on love (as opposed to self-centeredness) and awareness, rather than fear and catastrophe, in order to create an intrinsically greener world (Yang et al., 2019). Furthermore, the link between nature and *qi* favors, on the one hand, a healthier education, with health benefits for students on all levels: the energy, body, mind and emotions, achieved by strengthening *qi*. This link also produces a fuller and more balanced education, through inner development and the relationship with the outer world, including nature and other people.

For future research, it would be interesting to include primary and secondary school students from both Eastern and Western cultures; to conduct focus groups with both teachers and students or between students from the two different cultures; to design, implement and evaluate teaching programmed based on Taoist *dao*; and, lastly, to ascertain education research experts' opinions and attitudes towards the complementarity between Taoist contributions to education and their own national models of schooling.

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