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In this research paper I am comparing Western and Eastern Philosophy, trying to draw some connections between these two. Some scholars have expressed a rather dichotomous view. In this study I am going to display evidences to support my argument: there are connections and commonalities between Western and Eastern philosophy.

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Research Paper

East is not the Opposite of West: On Ontology in Ancient Greek and Ancient Chinese  
Philosophies

Abstract:

The nature of being and how our world operates are mysterious. While the intricacies of information become exponentially complex in the technological age, the origin of nature and what is being remain elusive. Since the beginning of human enquiring minds, which culture across the globe have, sought to articulate the nature of being. Modern scholars generally classify Western Philosophies as separate from Eastern counterparts, claiming they share few commonalities. Clearly philosophy evolves differently because they were shaped according social conventions over time, yet we shall see evidence supporting the deep and hidden connections between ancient Greek philosophy and ancient Chinese thoughts. After carefully reading and examining the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu and Heraclitus' Fragments, I find more commonalities we normally expect in both brilliant minds from different cultures, across the globe. In this paper, I shall show support for my finding in the connections, in both metaphysical and ontological point of view, from various scholars, the Tao Te Ching and Heraclitus' Fragments.

Introduction:

Overtime, many scholars, especially those who are specialized in Chinese Studies and other fields have focused on the comparison between traditional Western philosophy and Eastern counterparts, trying to examine and find a connection between two distinctive civilizations. A dichotomous view dominates in such a field. Some scholars, including social psychologist, Richard Nisbett, in his book *The Geography of Thoughts: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why*, claims the existence of a difference between Eastern and Western thoughts, suggesting “Easterners and Westerners have fundamentally different ways of seeing themselves and the social world” (Nisbett). Nisbett compares the heritage of “individualism” in western cultures, whereas Chinese valued “harmony” over individual realisation. This dichotomy is expressed in Rudyard Kipling’s Barrack-room ballads, Kipling said “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the the twain [two] shall meet.” However, I reject these representations. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate connections, between Greek philosopher Heraclitus and Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu in areas of ontology and metaphysics.

Nisbett is not alone. On the contrary, his views are backed by many scholars, including UCLA professor Randall Peerenboom. According to Peerenboom, there is a fundamental difference between Chinese cosmology and its western counterpart, though cosmogony plays an important role in ancient Chinese philosophy such as Taoism. In his paper *Cosmogony, The Taoist Way*, Peerenboom suggests “the thought of Lao Zi [...] it is envisioned in a manner significantly different from the Judeo-Christian *creatio ex nihilo* paradigm which has dominated the Western tradition” (Peerenboom 1). Peerenboom suggests if we can embrace the Taoist alternative, we can then understand that our universe does not entail a linear linear conception of time nor has a “starting point.”

However, this dichotomous view was called into doubt by some other scholars. In a cross-culture study paper published by pedagogy professor, Dr Janette Ryan, and Chinese Philosophy professor Kam Louie, *False Dichotomy? 'Western' and 'Confucian' concepts of scholarship and learning*, they pointed out that Western and Eastern philosophies are widely perceived “in binary terms.” However, such dichotomies can be misleading because frequently these approaches rely on “ideal” models that do not take into account the “diversity and complexity” cultural situatedness. I support Dr Ryan and Louie’s idea, with a twist. I find evidences against Nisbett’s view not from Confucian doctrines, which dominated China for more than two thousand years and has huge influences on Chinese culture, but from Taoism. (Ryan and Louie)

What is Taoism in the first place? According to renowned scholar in religion, Huston C. Smith, in his book *The World’s Religions*, Smith discusses three ways to interpret Taoism. One way is “the way of ultimate reality”. In the Chinese philosophical epic *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu announced: “The Tao that can be spoken is not the true Tao.” Such paradoxical nature directs us to find an ultimate reality only in a nameless non-being way. If something can be spoken of, it can be clearly and distinctly perceived. However, the ultimate reality can not and should not be clearly and distinctly perceived. Therefore, the Tao entails to a rather vague concepts which can only be understood, not perceived.

On Ontology:

While talking about reality, especially in the field of philosophy, it is inevitable to include Aristotle’s view in these matters. Aristotle, like many other philosophers before and after him, enquired into the nature of substance. In *Book Z*, Aristotle analysed the nature of substances. As he investigates, Aristotle concludes there are two sorts of matter: “One sort of

matter is perceptible, another intelligible.” (Aristotle) Not everything is perceivable like bronze and wood. We also encounter matter such as mathematical objects. This idea echoes a Taoist way of thinking: there must be something beyond our perception and indeed existing. In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu famously said: “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.” Lao Tzu would agree with western philosophers on the substances beyond articulations and languages. After all, in Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu said: “[...]The ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang. They achieve harmony by combining these forces” (42). Lao Tzu talks about the origin of our world, which started with conflicts(Yin and Yang), however, a temporary state of peace is achieved because of a balance between two opposite forces. This view echoes with Heraclitus’ Fragment 98, which says: “Opposition brings concord. Out of discord comes the fairest harmony” (Wheelwright 90). In American philosopher, classical scholar and literary theorist Philip Wheelwright’s study on Heraclitus, he points out that “To him[Heraclitus] nothing is exclusively this or that; in various ways he affirms something to be both of two dispartes or two contraries...”

According to professor Robert Chia’s paper “From Knowledge-Creation to the Perfecting of Action: Tao, Basho and Pure Experience as the Ultimate Ground of Knowing,” “‘eastern’ thinking is not entirely alien to the West”; (Chia) Chia has noticed the “deeper and invisible” (Chia) harmony advocated by ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Indeed the concept of harmony is considered opposite to the western ideology by many scholars, it now seems we also western minds in echo with eastern ones. I find this extremely interesting exception from traditional Western philosophy, which emphasizes “the eternal one” that creates our universe, such as Plato’s Theory of Forms. According to Heraclitus, there is not “the eternal one”, rather a ceaseless change in order to achieve a balance between two opposite forces.

On Metaphysics:

Too often, we have been trained to perceive our world in an “either-or” mindset: something is either good or bad; but what if something is both good and bad? Many would readily protest such a claim due to many years of living comfortably with such simple dichotomous view of judgment. However, if we look at our life more closely and widely, we shall find clear and distinct evidence suggesting that such claims are valid and valuable: when we claim something is good or bad, we are actually comparing this thing to something else in its own category with different qualities. Let us look at the example of height: normally a 10-year-old is taller than a 5-year-old; however, a 10-year-old is shorter than a fully-grown adult. Is he/she tall or short? There is not an absolute answer, he/she is both tall and short, according to whom he/she is comparing.

According to Chapter 2 in the Tao Te Ching, “[...] beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness. [...] good as good only because there is evil.” This is fascinating because it points out the nature of things: everything complements each other. Something is good only because there is something worse than that. This is Taoist relativity: nothing is permanently or strictly good or bad, high or short, easy or difficult, etc. Such words reflect an underlying comparison to others qualities.

This typical Eastern metaphysical view does not exclusively belong to Eastern thinkers. In rejecting Peerenboom et al, I found connections between Western minds and Eastern view on relativity. According to Heraclitus’ Fragment 99: “It is by disease that health is pleasant; by evil that good is pleasant; by hunger, satiety; by weariness, rest” (Wheelwright 90). Such paradoxical comparison must serve a metaphysical purpose: everything complements its opposite. It is by comparison that we perceive various qualities of different substances. Such connections between Lao Tzu (Eastern) and Heraclitus (Western) cannot and should not be ignored, though this has been pointed out by few.

## Conclusion:

A dichotomous view in Eastern and Western philosophies has dominated the philosophy field, backed by many scholars. As we have carefully examined and discussed in this paper, there are connections existing between Eastern and Western minds, showing evidence that such claims are hardly valid. Due to language barriers between Chinese languages and western languages, many potential connections have been overlooked. This study is limited by the number of sources, for I can only find connections between Tao Te Ching and Heraclitus' Fragments. Further research is needed for deeper understanding of the similarities and connections between Eastern and Western philosophies.

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