

**An Examination of Taoist and Buddhist Perspectives on Interpersonal
Conflicts, Emotions, and Adversities**

Rueyling Chuang

California State University, San Bernardino

As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp,
A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble,
A dream, a lightning flash, or cloud,
So should one view what is conditioned

– *The Diamond Sutra* (trans. Conze, 1958, p. 68)

Abstract

Taoism and Buddhism teachings have increasingly been integrated into psychology literature and psychotherapy. The Taoist notion of nonaction and the way and the Buddhist idea of enlightenment offer insight into human emotions. Communication scholars have also begun to explore the Taoist approach to conflict. By examining Taoist and Buddhist classics and teachings, this paper reveals the following essential themes: *sunyata* (emptiness or egolessness), Four Noble Truths, Tao, Conflict and Emotions, self-actualization, spontaneity and nonaction, ebb and flow of life, and nonattainment. This paper discusses fundamental Asian values while examining these spiritual readings. It illustrates implications of these Taoist and Buddhist teachings for communication studies.

Introduction

Recent research has afforded insight into the Chinese value system: facework (Chen & Starosta, 1997; Hwang, 1997), *yuan* (Chang & Holt, 1991a), direct versus indirect communication (Fong, 1998; Ma, 1996), Confucian impact on organizational communication (Chen & Chung, 1994), among many other concepts. Traversing the current research in Chinese communication, one finds that the emerging research on both facework and *guanxi* (*kuan-hsi*) (Chang & Holt, 1991b) sheds light on the cultural roots of Chinese conflict resolution, although these writers seldom explicate emotionality and approaches to coping

with adversities. The existing research on emotions in communication discipline has been primarily derived from Eurocentric perspectives and values (e.g., Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000). Additionally, current mainstream studies on spirituality and communication tend to focus on western perspectives (e.g., Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000).

Taoist Chuang Tzu and Buddhist teachings, such as the *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra*, provide alternative views on emotions and conflict resolution. Taoist and Buddhist thoughts represent underlying Asian values and the patterned way of ideal thinking and action. For example, Taoists advised individuals to “embrace rather than resist” personal conflicts and to “take no [unnatural] action” in dealing with adversarial situations. As De Bary, Chan, and Watson (1960) noted, the core of Taoism is “wu” (nonexistence), which is a pure being that transcends any “forms and names” (p. 240). In a similar vein, the impetus of the *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra* is to enlighten individuals to surpass emotional highs and lows and to see them as part of the flow of nature.

The purpose of this paper is to unveil the spiritual and philosophical roots of Chinese communication and their connection to fundamental Asian values. Specifically, the author seeks to examine Chinese philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of emotionality and conflict resolution. By examining Taoist teachings such as Chuang Tzu and Buddhist sutras, this essay strives to illuminate the extent to which these texts reflect Chinese philosophical ideals as they relate to western preoccupations with resolving conflicts and emotional adversity. To interpret Buddhist and Taoist teachings of spontaneity, *wu-wei* (nonaction), dialectic thinking, *kong/sunyata* (emptiness or selflessness), non-attainment and ebb and flow of life, this paper extrapolates specific passages from the *Heart Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, and Chuang Tzu. Thematic analyses from these texts and personal observations are utilized to illustrate the essence of Taoist and Buddhist teachings and to ascertain their relevancy to our contemporary life.

Values and Religion as a Cultural System

In his discussion of the dimensions of culture, Hofstede (2001) noted that values and culture guide our mental software. A value is an implicit or explicit conception of a desirable or preferable mode of conduct or state of existence (Hofstede, 2001; Kluckhohn, 1951; Rokeach, 1972). Values indicate a broad propensity to favor certain states of affairs or frames of mind. Values are associated with feelings (e.g., like versus dislike) and they deal with judgments such as good versus bad, “paradoxical versus logical,” and “irrational versus rational” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 6). Hofstede further delineated three types of

values: “those dealing with relationships with (1) other people, (2) things (our nonhuman environment), and (3) our own inner selves and God” (p. 8).

Hofstede’s assertions underscore the interconnectedness among values, culture, and religion. Religion is part of a cultural system because it affects culture’s social-structural and psychological processes (Geertz, 1973). Through symbols (e.g., scriptures) and rituals (e.g, chanting), religion not only offers modes of preferable conduct but also a “synopsis of cosmic order” and “a gloss upon the mundane world of social relationships and psychological events” (Geertz, 1973, p. 124). Religion provides a system of meaning embodied in the symbols, a symbol which describes cultural values and social order. For example, many Buddhist sutras such as the *Diamond Sutra* reveal the importance of appreciating emptiness (*kong*), understanding impermanence in life, and avoiding extremes (taking the middle paths).

The Concept of *Yuan*

Chang and Holt’s (1991) study of the concept of *yuan* and the Chinese perspective on social and romantic relationships exemplifies how religion affects an individual’s social and psychological interactions. Through an examination of Chinese literature and the Mandarin Chinese language, Chang and Holt found that the Buddhist concept of *yuan* (“dependent origination”) plays an important role in describing how the Chinese perceive their interpersonal relationships. *Yuan*, one of the most commonly referred to phrases derived from Buddhism, is also defined as “secondary causation” (p. 30). It is, as explained by Chang and Holt, a force in dyadic encounters that allows both the present environment and previous deeds (what they call “contextual factors”) to determine whether people will or will not be connected with each other. *Yuan* is paired with *yinyuan* (both principal and subsidiary causes or predestined relationship). *Yin* denotes principal cause, while *yuan* refers to secondary causation. The Chinese use the terms *yuan* and *yinyuan* simultaneously, when attribute to relationship development or the lack thereof. It is through *yuan* and *yinyuan* that two individuals serendipitously cross paths. Conversely, lack of *yuan* or due to bad *yinyuan* two people may part their ways or are constantly in conflict with each other. Thus, to put it in a cause and effect relationship, destructive *yinyuan* in the past leads to devastating consequence in the present moment.

The concept of *yuan* and *yinyuan* originates from the Sanskrit word *hetupratyaya*. *Yuan* and *yinyuan* are the Chinese rendition of *hetupratyaya*. *Hetu* denotes causes, whereas *pratyaya* means secondary causes. For example, seed is the cause (*hetu*) and rain, water, climate, and the gardener are secondary causes (*pratyaya*). According to Soothill and Hodous (1962), the compilers of *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* (1962), there are twelve causes or links

(*yinyuan*) in the chains or the whole range of human existence. They are “old age and death, rebirth, existence, grasping, love, receiving, feeling,” and “our six senses,” “our six forms of perceptions,” and finally “action and ignorance” (p. 186). These twelve causes are closely related to our interpersonal relationships and profoundly affect our emotional highs and lows. Thus, Chinese may see emotional turmoil and profound happiness as the results of these causes. *Yinyuan* can bring a relationship to fruition and it can also exacerbate relationship deterioration because of the seeds planted in previous life. For example, instead of trying to force a relationship which is ultimately doomed anyway, Chinese who believe in *yuan* may attribute the failed relationship to a lack of *yuan* or previous bad *yinyuan*.

Though Buddhists understand the importance of *yinyuan* (predestined relationship), they are not to be mistaken for fatalists. Rather, they believe in cosmic order and the law of nature. To be in harmony with nature or a person’s life is to follow the law of nature. *Yuan* and *yinyuan* are related to the concept of karma (law of causality) in that a person’s suffering or fortune can be caused by his or her previous deeds. The concept of *yuan* and *yinyuan* are cyclical rather than linear, unlike Western intellectual, who hold dear such traditions as the Cartesian paradigm, the Chinese generally believe that relationships are affected by karma or *yinyuan*, which is predetermined by one’s previous deeds. Coincidentally, most Buddhists and Taoists hold similar views on the laws of causality, rhythm of nature, and the nature of human interdependence. The following sections provide a brief summary of essential Taoist and Buddhist perspectives to illustrate Chinese cultural values.

An Overview of Buddhist and Taoist Perspectives

The Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra, and the *Diamond Sutra* are probably the most commonly recited Buddhist scriptures in Asian and Western Buddhist communities. Sutra can be loosely translated as the Buddhist scriptural narrative or sermon of Buddha. As Conze (1957) stated, among the thirty-eight different books of *Prajnaparamita* (transcendent wisdom in Sanskrit) literature, the holiest Buddhist scriptures are the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*, among the thirty generations of Buddhists in China, Japan, Tibet, and Mongolia. Both sutras are regarded as the core of Buddhist teachings, especially their discussions on wisdom and the concept of *sunyata* (emptiness, void, or selflessness). They are also two of the Zen Buddhism’s most important scriptures and essential teachings. *The Heart Sutra* and *The Diamond Sutra* were composed in India between 100 B.C. and A.D. 600 (Conze, 1957) and the *Prajnaparamita* (perfection of wisdom) literature has been analyzed and expounded for more than 2500 years (Nhat Hanh, 1988), especially in

Mahayana Buddhism. *Prajna* means (transcendent) wisdom and *paramita* denotes going beyond (Bokar & Donyo, 1994). Thus, *prajnaparamita* literally means that the understanding of the true nature of transcendent wisdom allows individuals to go beyond the endless reincarnation of this suffering world (*samsara*). Though Mahayana Buddhism originated in India, it flourished in China. As Takakusu (1956) pointed out, Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes universal salvation. It was fostered in China where “great strides in Buddhist studies were made and the different thought in Mahayana schools were systematized” (p. 9).

The Heart Sutra and the *Diamond Sutra* exemplify the essence of Mahayana Buddhism teachings. They are perhaps the most diligently studied and analyzed scriptures in Buddhist monasteries and within Western scholarly circles (Lopez, 1998). Both sutras offer great emotional comfort to Chinese converts, so much so that the chanting of both scriptures have become part of Chinese funeral rituals. It is quite common that the deceased’s family hire Buddhist nuns to chant the *Diamond Sutra* or the *Heart Sutra* at a traditional Chinese Buddhist or religious Taoist funeral. These sutras provide a glimpse of hope for the family members that the deceased may transcend this suffering world (*samsara*), which continues the endless cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation, to nirvana. The mantra, originated from the *Heart Sutra* – (om) *gate gate pragate prasagate bodhi svaha* (having gone, having gone, having gone beyond, having completely gone beyond, there is enlightenment) – represents five progressive paths to an exalted state of enlightenment.

Recitation of the aforementioned mantra and the *Heart Sutra* is commonly utilized in exorcism (Lopez, 1996). It is believed that the *Heart Sutra* possesses such profound mythical power that it will repel demons and ward off misfortune. It is important to know, though, that rather than condemn this ritual as a religious superstition, one should see the chanting of the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra* as a communication act, which consoles and uplifts the family members’ spirits. The ritual of chanting both sutras is a form of communication which serves to remind individuals to be empathic and to stay in a state of calmness and meditative concentration (*samadhi*). It is said that Buddhism is not just a religion, it is also related to psychology. As one of my friends, whose father just passed on, had once said, the chanting of the *Heart Sutra* is actually for the surviving members of the family rather than for the deceased. It offers hope, assent, and comfort to the family members amidst their profound loss and grief.

In the *Heart Sutra*, we read “no interdependent origins and no extinction of them (from ignorance to old age and death); no suffering, no origination of suffering, no extinction of suffering; no path; no understanding; no attainment” ([*parentheses original*] trans. Nhat Hanh, 1988, p. 1). The chanting of the *Heart*

Sutra or the *Diamond Sutra* presents a form of communication, which lends individuals emotional support and consolation while they are in despair. As Chodron (2000) revealed in her book *When Things Fall Apart*, by adopting the Buddhist perspective (and I add Taoist outlook on life), an individual learns to accept that life is groundless, and filled with difficulties. By letting go, we free ourselves from suffering. Through attunement with our intense emotions such as resentment, depression, sadness, and guilt, we learn to embrace these afflictions and allow ourselves to be healed. Several passages from both scriptures have become common phrases in the Chinese language. For example, one of the widely popularized phrases from the *Heart Sutra* – “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form” – is often quoted in Chinese conversation, regardless of an individual’s religious background. The general themes of Buddhism, such as emptiness (*sunyata*), right view, four noble truths, no attainment, are germane to overcoming calamities in our everyday life.

The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths consist of affliction, response to affliction, containment, and the right track. The Four Noble Truths were upheld by the Mahayana Buddhism, which includes offshoots such as Zen Buddhism. One of the important concepts of Buddha’s teaching is the inevitability of affliction and adversity. Thus, the first noble truth is *dukkha* (affliction). Birth, old age, sickness, death, grief, lamentation, pain, depression, and agitation are *dukkha* (Brazier, 1998). Brazier (1998) noted that Buddhism is about noble living and not about eliminating calamity. Noble living invokes the existence of hardship. The cause to affliction or adversity is then the second noble truth. In response to *dukkha*, an individual is triggered by a “thirst for self-recreation which is associated with greed” and “sense pleasure, for being and non-being” (p. 185). Looking at the second noble truth, it makes sense as to why people use drugs, alcohol, or any kind of addiction to mask their misery and affliction. The third noble truth is complete extinction, which means to let go of that thirst and unshackle oneself from that thirst. Buddha informed us that “Containment should be understood to be a noble truth – this was the insight, understanding, wisdom, knowledge, and clarity which arose in me about things untaught” (Brazier, 1998, p. 186).

Finally, after letting go of desire, a person should follow the right path. The fourth noble truth *marga* (the right track) entails the noble eight-limb way, “namely, right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right *samadhi* (concentration)” (Brazier, 1998, p. 186). By embarking on the aforementioned Eightfold Path, a person ends his or her suffering and reaches nirvana. Accordingly, Buddha’s teaching is to show us how to be enlightened amidst our adversity and emotional turmoil and not to

be defeated by life's difficulties. Buddha taught us to accept suffering and affective situations, and to "meet affliction and live nobly, so that suffering is not unnecessarily multiplied" (Brazier, 1998, p. 43).

Tao, Conflict, and Emotions

Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths and ways to cope with our profound sadness and sufferings resonate with Taoist views of acceptance and *wu-wei* ("non-action"). One of the essential teachings of philosophical Taoism is the notion of ebb and flow of human existence (Crawford, 1996), which includes conflict, adversity, and emotional upheaval. Crawford (1997) suggested four approaches, originated from Taoist philosophy, to manage interpersonal conflict. They are: "Don't fight, recognize conflict as merely part of a larger whole," realize that conflict can be viewed as a vehicle to solidify relationships, and acknowledge the principle of "exhausting the *yang* to return to the *yin*" (p. 367).

Crawford, by examining Chinese Taoist classics, concluded that conflict and harmony are closely connected. Crawford's first rule of framing interpersonal conflict via Taoist perspectives, "don't fight," cautions us in regard to the downside of being belligerent. To be contentious or readily quarrelsome fumes the fire of conflict. Secondly, Crawford reminded us to see conflict from a larger picture and to identify conflict from a wider and holistic perspective. Thirdly, he suggested that we view conflict as a possible way to strengthen interpersonal ties. Crawford's third observation of Taoist approach to conflict is in sync with other communication scholars who argue that conflict can be positive, exciting, and helpful. For example, Wilmot and Hocker (2001) listed the positive sides of conflict. It can enrich and energize relationships, help to clarify illusive goals, and produce growth opportunity for the conflicting parties. Finally, Crawford's (1997) idea of "exhausting the *yang* to return to the *yin*" embodies the core value of Taoism.

Tao (the way), as a Taoist sees it, is the harmonious cycle between *yin* and *yang*. Everything extreme must swing to the opposing end. As *I Ching* revealed, excessive *yang* is the time *yin* initiates momentum, and vice versa. Thus, Lao Tzu asserted, "All beings bear *yin* and embrace *yang*, with a mellowing energy for harmony" (chap. 42, trans. Cleary, 1991, p. 35). The natural cycle of *yin* and *yang* indicates the importance of avoiding extremes. Individuals are warned that "those who contrive spoil it; those who cling lose it" (chap. 29). Lao Tzu continued to reveal the wisdom of keeping our perspective. As he stated, since things "sometimes go and sometimes follow, Sometimes puff and sometimes blow, Are sometimes strong and sometimes weak, Begin sometime and end sometime; Therefore sages remove extremes, Remove extravagance, Remove arrogance" (chap. 29). Since being strong or weak is part of the cycle, it is then paramount for us to remember that conflict is a natural process and to lose

something in an adversarial situation is to gain something in return.

To continue and expand his delineation of the philosophical Tao's approach to conflict resolution, Crawford (in press) supplied us with the following six ideas: embrace rather than resist, accept things for whatever they are; no expectations, allow things to happen as they go; don't take anything personally; everything changes – the only certainty is uncertainty and nothing stays the same; let other people off the hook; and death is imminent. Crawford's six ideas, derived from Taoist teachings, are beneficial for resolving interpersonal conflicts. In close relationships, we often see divorced couples who waited too long to communicate and when they do express their frustration, it is already too late.

Crawford (in press) advocated that we should embrace our circumstances and to confront the conflict with an open mind rather than to resist it. We also see in a dysfunctional relationship a person takes everything in until s/he cannot take it any longer and then explodes. Avoiding afflictive situations or using passive aggressive tactics also lead to destructive conflict (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001). Along with the idea of acceptance, the principle of "no expectation" is also paramount to maintaining interpersonal relationships. Lao Tzu brought to light the paradoxical nature of letting go. By expecting nothing, and having no expectations, the relationship becomes more fulfilling. In Chapter 55 of *Tao Te Ching*, we read "To hasten the growth of life is ominous. To control the breath by the will is to overstrain it. To be overgrown is to decay" (trans. Wu, p. 113). Only when we cease to weary people, people will then cease to be wearied of us. Crawford's (in press) Taoist idea of "Nothing changes – Nothing stays the same" synchronizes with Buddhism's perspective that nothing is forever. Once we recognize that nothing is permanent, we can elevate ourselves above suffering. As the *Heart Sutra* reveals, once we accept that nothing stays the same and we forgo those "thoughts-coverings" we will not "tremble." Consequently, we can "overcome what can upset" (trans. Conze, 1958, p. 93).

Buddhism, Taoism, and Western Psychology of Self-Actualization

Buddhist teachings of an exalted state of enlightenment and the four noble truths bear a strong resemblance to Taoist notions of following the "way," and Western communication aspects of "self-actualization." In Chang and Page's (1991) comparison of Chinese Taoism and Zen Buddhism's view of human potential versus Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow's theories of self-actualization, they revealed great similarities among the four. The sage manifested in Taoism and the enlightened person in Zen Buddhism resemble the self-actualizing person indicated in Western psychology. Chang and Page argued that both Rogers and Maslow emphasized that self-actualization

constitutes the most favorable psychological stage for all human beings. The goal of psychotherapy then is to help individuals develop their full potential for self-actualization. Similarly, Chang and Page observed that both Zen Buddhism and Taoism also are concerned with the development of full human potential.

Taoists, such as Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, looked at human existence as an integral part of the great cosmos. What then is Tao or the way? Tao is the belief in which the spontaneous processes created by the phenomenal and natural worlds influence all creation in life and life itself. One of the most important principles of Taoism is to maintain a harmonious relationship with Tao, a state of metaphysical reality, which can be loosely interpreted as a natural law or pattern of human existence. Zen Buddhism, Chang and Page observed, stresses the importance of human naturalness and spontaneity and recognizes the illusory nature of the ego. Here we see the similarities between Taoism and Zen Buddhism in their emphasis on nature (i.e., “the way” or “suchness”) and spontaneity. Accordingly, Chang and Page asserted that the Zen idea of human independence is to participate in each moment of living, achieve full independence in one’s thought and action, and not to place oneself in conflict with nature or other people.

Spontaneity and Nonaction

Liu (1998) asserted that *tzu-jan* (spontaneity or natural) and *wu-wei* are “essential notions in Taoism, whose meanings are often thought to be identical” (p. 211). However, Liu argued that spontaneity is the principal value of Taoism while *wu-wei* is the core method to achieve it in social life. In explaining a different meaning for *tzu-jan*, Liu focused on the meaning of “natural, naturalness, spontaneous or spontaneity” (p. 212) or “to be natural” (p. 212). The state of naturalness or “so on its own” implies a harmonious situation, which does not involve conflict, drastic change, external enforcement, or abrupt transformations. “Taken literally, *wu-wei* seems to deny all human behavior and action” (p. 218); however, Liu noted, the overall implication of *wu-wei* is to eradicate or “reduce” human actions.

The following passage exemplifies the Taoist notion of *wu-wei*: “The world is a sacred vessel, which must not be tampered with or grabbed after. To tamper with it is to spoil it, and to grasp it is to lose it” (*Tao Teh Ching*, chap. 29, trans. Wu, 1997, p.59). The following excerpt from *Tao Teh Ching* also illustrates the importance of *tzu-jan*, that is, to go with the flow and not to apply excessive forces in changing things: “He who fusses over anything spoils it. He who grasps anything loses it. The Sage fusses over nothing and therefore spoils nothing. He grips at nothing and therefore loses nothing” (chap. 64).

Lao Tzu’s approach to conflict is very different from popular American sayings such as “Don’t just sit there, do something.” His advice of letting things

go reminds us to keep our perspective in the midst of our quest for perfection. For example, I often hear my friends who pride themselves on being “fussy” and insisting on everything being “neat and tidy.” Because of their persistence with being “very picky,” they have forgotten to see the whole big picture, have spoiled their harmonious relationship with people around them, and have hindered their own growth. And thus, Lao Tzu cautioned us to keep in mind that there is a natural way that affects our action: “Man follows the ways of the Earth. The Earth follows the ways of Heaven. Heaven follows the ways of Tao. Tao follows its own ways” (chap. 25). In a similar vein, Chuang Tzu also advised us to let go of our own preconceived frame of mind and allow ourselves to embrace the natural cycle of ups and downs, especially in dealing with our physical conditions and afflictive situations. The readers are to be reminded that “Hunger and thirst, cold and heat, being pent in and stopped up, and failing to advance are heaven and earth proceeding on their courses, the off-flow from things as they turn in their cycles; the point is to let oneself flow on with them” (*Chuang Tzu*, chap. 20, trans. Graham, 1986, p. 167).

The aforementioned excerpt reinforces Lao Tzu’s and Chuang Tzu’s idea of harmonizing with the natural flow of action, letting Tao go on its own course, without excessive strife. Paradoxically, also because of this approach to a conflictual situation, one actually conquers. As Lao Tzu asserted, “It is Heaven’s Way to conquer without striving, to get responses without speaking, To induce the people to come without summoning, To act according to plans without haste” (chap. 73). Lao Tzu’s teaching of bringing about other people’s compliance contradicts the Machiavellian manipulation of power and threat to achieve a person’s goal.

Along with the idea of going with the flow and following the natural way, Taoists also advocate *wu-wei*. Both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu mentioned in their teaching that the best ruler is a ruler who does not rule. As Chuang Tzu stated, “So if the gentleman is left with no choice but to preside over the world, his best policy is Doing Nothing. Only by Doing Nothing will he find security in the essentials of his nature and destiny” (trans. Graham, 1986, p. 212). It is only because of the leader’s adaptation of *wu-wei* that this person actually achieves more. “The doer of the Way every day does less, less, and less until he does nothing at all, and in doing nothing there is nothing that he does not do” (p. 159). The Taoist approach of *wu-wei* seems quite challenging to those who live amidst an era where bigger is better (*a la* SUVs and big houses) and a person is judged on how much he or she achieves. The notion of *wu-wei* accentuates the difference of cultural values, from an intercultural communication point of view. For example, Jandt (2001) commented that one of the dominant U.S. cultural patterns is activity orientation. “Activity and work,” “efficiency and practicality,” and “progress and change” are the prevailing cultural values of the United States

(pp. 238-239).

Sunyata/Kong (Emptiness)

In his analysis of Tao and conversation, Crawford (1996) revealed that emptiness is one of the major themes of Taoist teaching. The Sanskrit word *sunyata* denotes *kong* in Chinese, and the concept of *sunyata/kong* is widely translated as “emptiness” in English. Interestingly enough, *sunyata* (emptiness) is one of the most essential ideas of Buddhism, so much so that Lopez (1998) entitled his book on the analysis of the *Heart Sutra, Elaborations on Emptiness*. Both Taoist and Buddhist teachings of emptiness have increasingly drawn attention to the field of psychology (Brazier, 1998). Consider the following passage from the *Heart Sutra*: “Form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness (“The *Heart Sutra*,” trans. Conze, 1958, p. 81). The following passage from the *Heart Sutra* captured the essence of Buddhist teachings:

Therefore in emptiness there is neither form, nor feelings, nor perceptions, nor mental formations, nor consciousness; no eye, or ear, or tongue, or body, or mind; no form, no sound, no smell, to taste, no touch, no object of mind; no realms of elements (from eyes to mind consciousness); no interdependent origins and no extinction of them (from ignorance to old age and death); no suffering, no origination of suffering, no extinction of suffering, no path; no understanding, no attainment. [*parentheseses original*]
(trans. Nhat Hanh, 1988, p. 1).

Here the *Heart Sutra* teaches us to realize that our emotions, perceptions, and our senses, are a mere illusion and nothing stays permanent. Our feelings and myriad things are like a dream, magic show, a bubble, a shadow, like the morning dew, and the lightning thunderbolt. They come and go, as part of the natural cycle, as stated in the fourth stanza of lines I quoted from the *Diamond Sutra*. Accordingly, Chuang Tzu reminded us to question our own emotions and perceptions, because the way is invisible and forever changeable and non-changeable: “Whatever you hear is something else. The way is invisible, whatever you see is something else. The way is ineffable, whatever you talk about is something else. Do you know that the shaper of shapes is unshaped? The Way does not fit a name” (p. 163).

(Non)Perception and Non-attainment

Because our feelings, emotions, and our senses are in the form of emptiness, we should then challenge our perceptions and be mindful about our attachment

to things or people. The *Diamond Sutra* revealed that perception of self is indeed no perception. And that “perception of a being, a soul or person,” is “indeed no perception” (trans. Conze, 1958, p. 53). Since our perception is unobtainable, so are our thoughts and action.

And the *Heart Sutra* continued to accentuate the importance of liberating our clinging attachment from things and feelings: “It is because of his nonattainmentness that a Bodhisattava, though having relied on the perfection of wisdom, dwells without thought-coverings. In the absence of thought-coverings, he has not been made to tremble, he has overcome what can upset, and in the end he attains to Nirvana” (trans. Conze, 1958, p. 93). We fall because we try too hard; we lose because we want something too much. We dwell on our thoughts too much and, consequently, we hinder our own progression. Time and time again both Taoism and Buddhism advocate the dialectical nature of human existence. As Lao Tzu simply put it in Chapter 22: “Bend and you will be whole. Curl and you will be straight. Keep empty and you will be filled. Grow old and you will be renewed. Have little and you will gain.”

Ebb and Flow/Dialectical Nature of Life

Traversing all these essential teachings of Buddhism and philosophical Taoism such as emptiness, non-attainment, non-perception, we found an overarching theme: human interactions are consistent with this dialectical, and sometimes paradoxical, rhythm of life. Just like the ebb and flow of tides, our lived experience is filled with emotional ups and downs. As Lao Tzu eloquently stated:

Bad fortune is what good fortune leans on,
 Good fortune is what bad fortune hides in,
 Who knows the ultimate end of this process?
 Is there no norm of right?
 Yet what is normal soon becomes abnormal,
 And what is auspicious soon turns ominous.
 Long indeed have the people been in a quandary. (chap. 58)

Discussion and Implications

By examining Taoist and Buddhist scriptures, this paper reveals the general themes of both teachings: four noble truths, self-actualization, *kong* (emptiness), ebb and flow/dialectical nature of life, impermanence and non-attainment. These themes undergird fundamental Asian values, which are pervasive in Northeast Asia and certain parts of Southeast Asia. These ideal cultural values provide guidance for Chinese and Asians’ modes of conduct and social/psychological frame of mind. To compare different commentaries and interpretations of these

Taoist and Buddhism classics, I used different versions/translations of *Tao Te Ching*, Chuang-Tzu's *Inner Chapters*, the *Heart Sutra*, and the *Diamond Sutra*. These four texts reveal several similarities in their approach to resolving interpersonal conflict, emotions, and adversities. The essence of Taoist and Buddhist teachings, such as *kong/sunyata*, impermanence, and nonattachment, are enunciated in these four texts. Their discussions of diminishing one's ignorance, freeing ourselves from attachments and suffering, and viewing the ups and downs of life as being part of the natural cycle/rhythm, offer valuable suggestions for individuals both in the psychology and communication fields.

Taoists and Buddhists adopt a similar communicative approach of negation in their discussion of Tao and dharma. Taoists and Buddhists never explicitly discuss what is Tao or dharma, but rather they explain both terms based on what is not. For example, the beginning of *Tao Te Ching* clearly specifies that if Tao can be talked about then it is not the eternal Tao, and if Tao can be explicitly named then it is not the right name. Accordingly, for Buddhists dharma is not attainment and not permanent. Enlightenment is a state of not clinging to one's desire, perception, emotion, and fixation. Through rhetorical strategies of negation, double negation (e.g., no permanent, no impermanent), and paradox (e.g., grasp then you will lose), Taoist and Buddhist teachings propose a dialectical communication model which is different from the Western model of rational and linear communication.

The Western concept of logical linear causation or rationality neither explains the complexity of *yuan* or *yinyuan* nor the dialectical relationship between *yin* and *yang*. Buddhist perspectives illuminate ideal moral consciousness (e.g., the eight paths) and Taoist thoughts predispose communicative action (e.g., parsimoniousness, no excessiveness), as contrasted with the Western values and *modus operandi*. Taoist and Buddhist approaches to communication encourage individuals to be flexible and empathic, to think outside the box, and to free oneself from materialism and selfishness which may bring unhappiness and affliction. The Western communication model of goal orientation, compliance-gaining strategies, sender-centered approach, communication competence, and individualism may not account for the Asian view on relational outcome. Contrary to the Western model of the uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Gudykunst, 1988), which is widely adopted in the fields of interpersonal and intercultural communication, Buddhist and Taoist perspectives encourage individuals to embrace uncertainty and to realize that life is impermanent and constantly in flux. Instead of "reducing" uncertainty, Buddhism and Taoism, through their verbal symbols (i.e., scriptures and texts) and dialectical/ paradoxical reasoning, invite individuals to accept uncertainty and to see calamity as part of life.

Though Taoism and Buddhism caution individuals to be parsimonious and

be skeptical about language, nonetheless, they do not discourage communication. Instead, they address the importance of nonverbal communication and keen awareness of one's harmony with the environment and the metaphysical world of one's existence. Taoism and Buddhism shift the primary attention of communication from self to contextual factors, which include cause and effect, human relationships, *yinyuan*, and the law of nature. This paper discusses the transcendental dimensions of self, relationship, and human emotion. It is important to know that, though Taoists and Buddhists adopt dialectical perspectives on human existence, they do not perceive *yin/yang* and permanent/impermanent as mutually exclusive nor the opposite end of contradictions as Western communication scholars such as Baxter (1988) suggested. Instead, Taoists and Buddhists propose a transcendental communication model, which sees *yin/yang*, win/lose, happiness/suffering, death/rebirth, and permanent/impermanent as an ongoing complementary cycle. Though both Baxter and Taoists coincidentally highlight the dialectical nature of human relationships, Taoism and Buddhism provide a transcendental dimension to spirituality, which is in sync with the rhythm of nature.

In addition to the elaboration on *yuan* as an exemplary Chinese value, the paper also brings to light the importance of *sunyata* or *kong* in transcendental communication. The concept of *kong* is germane to the essential teachings of Buddhism and Taoism. As illustrated by the *Heart Sutra* and *Diamond Sutra*, the form is empty and the emptiness is form and the law of all conditions is like a dream and flashing light. Though it is important to understand that all our emotions and sensations are illusionary and ephemeral, it is equally important to be mindful of the true essence of *sunyata* (or *kong* in Chinese). The English translation of emptiness does not quite capture the complexity and multifaceted dimensions of *kong/Sunyata*. *Kong* is often mistaken for nothingness or misinterpreted as a passive outlook on life. Rather, *kong*, just like *Tao*, means impermanence and selflessness, which means that nothing can stand alone and everything relies on interdependence. *Kong* represents one of the essential terminal values (end states) of Buddhism, while eradication of covetousness, hatred, and ignorance exemplifies Buddhists' instrumental values (means to get there). *Yuan*, right view, and state of *kong* are interdependent. *Yuan* arises from selflessness, and once one empties out his or her fixation and correct one's views, then everything will naturally follow.

Future communication researchers can consider a postmodern approach to Buddhism (Lopez, 1998) and further explicate the connection between philosophical Taoism and interpersonal communication. This paper provides a first attempt to consolidate Buddhist and Taoist texts and apply them in the interpersonal and intercultural communication contexts, specifically in discussing how Chinese cope with conflict and emotional ups and downs. It adopts the

concepts of *yuan*, *kong wu-wei*, spontaneity and harmony with nature to illustrate underlying Chinese values. Buddhist and Taoist teachings contain an immense amount of knowledge which future researchers can explore, such as illuminating Zen Buddhism's approach to human communication and theorizing transcendental communication.

* *The author is grateful to Otto and Corrina Chang for their invaluable insights on Buddhism.*

References

- Baxter, L. (1988). A dialectical perspective on communication strategies in relationship development. In S. Duck (Ed.), *A handbook of personal relationships* (pp. 257-273). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Berger, C. R., & Bradac, J. J. (1982). *Language and social knowledge: Uncertainty in interpersonal relations*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Bokar, Rinpoche, & Donyo, K. (1994). *Profound wisdom of The Heart Sutra and other teachings*. San Francisco, CA: ClaePoint Press.
- Brazier, D. (1998). *The feeling Buddha: A Buddhist psychology of character, adversity and passion*. New York: Fromm International.
- Chang, H-C., & Holt, G. R. (1991a). The concept of *yuan* and Chinese interpersonal relationships. In S. Ting-Toomey & F. Korzenny (Eds.), *Cross-cultural interpersonal communication* (pp. 28-57). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Chang, H-C., & Holt, G. R. (1991b). More than relationship: Chinese interaction and the principle of *guan-hsi*. *Communication Quarterly*, 39, 251-271.
- Chang, R., & Page, R. C. (1991). Characteristics of the self-actualized person: Visions from the East and West. *Counseling and Values*, 36 (1), 2-10.
- Chen, G. M., & Chung, J. (1994). The "Five Asian Dragons": Management behaviors and organizational communication. *Communication Quarterly*, 42 (2), 93-105.
- Chen, G. M., & Starosta, W. J. (1997). Chinese conflict management and resolution: Overview and implications. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 7 (1), 1-16.
- Chodron, P. (2000). *When things fall apart*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Chung, T. C. (1992). *Zhuangzi speaks: The music of nature* (Trans. by B. Bruya). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Chuang-Tzu: The inner chapters*. (1986). (A. C. Graham, Trans.) London: Unwin Paperbacks.

- Cleary, T. (Trans.). (1991). *The essential Tao: An initiation into the heart of Taoism through the authentic Tao Te Ching and the inner teachings of Chuang-Tzu*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Conze, E. (Trans.). (1958). *Buddhist wisdom books: Containing the Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Crawford, L. (1996). Everyday Tao. *Communication Studies*, 1996 (1&2), 25-34.
- Crawford, L. (1997). Conflict and Tao. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 8, 357-370.
- Crawford, L. (in press). Six ideas, interpersonal conflict, and philosophical Taoism. In G. M. Chen & R. Ma (Eds.), *Chinese conflict management and resolutions*. Stamford, CT: Ablex.
- De Bary, W. T., Chan, W-T., & Watson, B. (1960). *Sources of Chinese tradition* (vol. 1). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fong, M. (1998). Chinese immigrants' perceptions of semantic dimensions of direct/indirect communication in intercultural compliment interactions with North Americans. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 9, 245-262.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *Interpretation of culture*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gudykusnt, W. (1988). Uncertainty and anxiety. In Y. Y. Kim & W. Gudykunst (Eds.), *Theories in intercultural communication* (pp. 123-156). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Nhat Hanh, T. (1988). *The heart of understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hwang, K-K. (1997). *Guanxi and Mientze: Conflict resolution in Chinese society*. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 7, 17-42.
- Jandt, F. (2001). *Intercultural communication: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jia, W. (1997). Facework as a Chinese conflict-preventive mechanism. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 7, 43-62.
- Kluckhohn, C. (1951). The study of culture. In D. Lerner & H. D. Lasswell (Eds.), *The policy sciences* (pp. 86-101). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lao Tzu. (1997). *Tao Teh Ching* (J. C. H. Wu, Trans.). New York: Barnes & Noble.
- Lewis, M., & Haviland-Jones, J. M. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of emotions*. New York: Guilford.
- Liu, X. (1998). Naturalness (*Tzu-jan*), the core value in Taoism: Its ancient meaning and its significance today. In L. Kohn & M. LaFargue (Eds.), *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching* (pp. 211-230). Albany, NY: State University of

- New York Press.
- Lopez, D. (1998). *Elaborations on emptiness*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Ma, R. (1996). Saying "yes" for "no" and "no" for "yes": A Chinese rule. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25, 257-266.
- Ramsey, J., & Blieszner, R. (2000). Community, affect, and family relations: A cross-cultural study of spiritual resiliency in eight old women. *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 11 (1), 39-64.
- Rinpoche, B., & Donyo, K. (1994). *Profound wisdom of The Heart Sutra and other teachings*. San Francisco, CA: ClearPoint Press.
- Rokeach, M. (1972). *Beliefs, attitudes and values: A theory of organization and change*. San Francisco: Joseey-Bass.
- Soothill, W. E., & Hodous, L. (Eds.). (1962). *A dictionary of Chinese Buddhist terms*. Taipei, Taiwan: Buddhist Culture Service.
- Takakusu, J. (1956). *The essentials of Buddhist philosophy*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Wilmont, W., & Hocker, J. (2001). *Interpersonal conflict*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

