

About the Cover

Cover Essay: Taoism's Ecological Wisdom and the Flight of the Cormorant

Man is controlled by the earth, the earth by heaven, heaven by the divine law, and the divine law follows nature—Lao Zi, Philosopher and Founder of Taoism.

The idyllic scene on our cover by Guyu An represents a classic image of the Chinese countryside that appeals to the Western and Eastern eye alike. The image of a seated figure reflected through the perfect circle of the bridge. The pale lemon sun. The fisherman. The pagoda. These images speak of calm, of our own internal reflection as we contemplate our place in nature. As Lao Zi put it:

Heaven and earth merge with each other, just as sweet dew falls.

These images have great resonance in the West, where Lao Zi's classic works are still best sellers. But are there deeper messages about our relationship with nature that Taoism can illuminate? Taoism teaches us that everything grows in accordance to divine law, but that nature runs through all of this. Thus, we are bound by nature's rules, and intertwined in a complex relationship with nature.

If you do not violate the principle, there is nothing you cannot do.

In Guyu An's painting we see a pair of cormorants perched on the bridge. We are reminded of the ancient practice of fishing with cormorants that is still, famously, pursued in China's largest highland lake, Lake Erhai, in the subtropical southwest. Cormorant fishing has been practiced in China for at least 1000 years (Hoh, 1998), although it really only came to notice in the West during in the 16th Century (Gudger, 1926). Fishermen train birds to catch fish, which the cormorants cannot fully swallow due to a cord tied around their necks. The fish are regurgitated when the cormorants return to the boat or raft and they are rewarded

at the end of a fishing trip with food. This once productive fishing technique has been marginalized by the pressures of industrialization, commercialization, and trade, and persists only in a few communities such as those in Lake Erhai (Manzi and Coomes, 2002). However, over the past few decades, development of paper mills, marble-quarrying, and industrial agriculture around this lake has led to a decline in water quality, eutrophication, and reduced fish yield (Wang et al., 1999). At the same time, the growth of aquaculture (2712 fish farms around Lake Erhai by 2002) appears to have exacerbated eutrophication, reduced lake vegetation, and further reduced survival of wild fish populations (Manzi and Coomes, 2002).

Taoism teaches us that: *Everything has a light side and a dark side and co-exists in harmony.* Lao Zi maintained that two opposite sides forming a contradiction will turn into their opposite directions and yet depend on each other. In the image on our cover, we see a stylized vision of this harmony—a peaceful scene of humans living with nature without exploitation. This is surely one which cannot be maintained in the modern world, especially in modern China, where the race toward economic development is magnified far beyond anything Lao Zi could have imagined. Lao Zi famously searched for an earthly implementation of divine law. He instructed his pupils to establish a society ruled by the divine law in the Tarim Basin—at the Hetian Oasis. This search for Utopia is a theme repeated through human history in the West. Plato yearned for an earthly paradise in *An Ideal State*, and the Utopian socialist philosophers like Owen, Fourier, and Saint-Simon envisioned a perfect society with cog-like moving parts. These, though, were *civil* enterprises, with the natural world relegated to an Arcadia-like vision viewed through a window—bereft of human habitation. In contrast, the Utopia of Lao

Zi was based on Taoist divine law—ultimately dictated by nature, but with society as an integrated part of this law. Perhaps this helps explain to the Western eye the curiously Chinese view of the human place in nature so clearly shown in the cover art: People are integrated into the countryside, which is itself modified to support their existence—opposite sides which depend on each other. Just as the water is there for the fisherman, so the fisherman is there for the cormorants and, ultimately, the cormorants are there for the fish. As Lao Zi put it:

The divine law may be spoken of, but it is not the common law. Things may be named, but names are not the things.

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THE ARTIST

Guyu An was born in 1964 in Beijing to an aristocratic and artistic family. From an early age, he was encouraged to doodle and draw from the world around him. Interestingly, his childhood work is very like the modern Chinese art currently in fashion. He graduated from the prestigious Beijing Fine Arts Institute with highest praise and has since gone on to earn his living by his art. Guyu has been fortunate to study with some of the living masters of art in China including Shihian Zhang, Bao Liu, and Guangzhi Zhang. Though renown in China and considered by some a master in his own right, Guyu's work is now becoming admired and coveted by an international audience.

Cover Art

Cormorant Fishing by Guyu An, May 2007. Ink on rice paper, 40 cm × 60 cm.

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