**上海外国语大学 2020 –2021学年第一学期**

**期末考试试卷**

课程名称 中国文化概要

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**Please write an essay about 500-800 words in English, explaining a cultural phenomenon in China. A comparative perspective is encouraged.**

Note:

To avoid gender bias, this essay uses non-binary third-person pronoun (they) when referring to an unspecified individual.

The Nature: From the Neo-Daoism of Jin Dynasty to the American Transcendentalism

Yue Daiyun once wrote in her essay on comparative literature that some common themes keep recurring throughout literary works even from different cultures, such as eremitism. The reason why eremitism always returns to literature is that in real life people, particularly the educated lot, seem to instinctively take refuge in the nature, an accessible enough hide-out, once the corruption and disarray of human world become too overwhelming. Away from human establishment and devoid of social influence, it seems that there is a bigger potential to achieve independent self-cultivation towards harmony, peace, and liberation as well.

The idea to flourish in the “nature”, the untainted ecological environment of forests, woods, and waters, and develop one’s own “nature”, the intellectual and mental capacity to probe into the fabric of life itself, is at the heart of the Neo-Daoism that thrived as a cultural and philosophical faction during Jin dynasty. Essentially, it is believed that the truths and principles of the world lie in the natural environment, though obscured to those who seek worldly benefits as fame and wealth. By integrating oneself with nature, one is able to recover the beauty, virtue, and emancipation previously lost to them and develop a mind that is able to spontaneously know what is morally right and desirable, a mind true to themselves and united with *Dao* (the Way).

Neo-Daoism underwent change as Jin literati sought different end-goals by developing the idea. During the age of the “Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove,” who were downright disillusioned and marginalized by the then corrupt politics and onerous rituals required by Confucianism, Neo-Daoism served more of an escape attempt and cope mechanism. Bureaucratic work could be a mortal dance if one was not sufficiently careful and obsequious. Alongside the almost chaste disclaimer to politics, relocated residence in the woods of figures like Ji Kang and Ruan Ji, Neo-Daoism truly appeared as a passive-aggressive response to the inequality the court had bestowed upon learned class. But, as Guoxiang started a new chapter on the ideology, it took on a more proactive and utilitarian path as a way to prepare the intellectuals to one day re-engage in sociopolitical affairs.

The premise is built on an individual integrated with the nature, their own nature thoroughly developed as well. By recognizing the liability to change of the outside world, the individual recognizes their own inevitability to change, to an extent where exterior gains seem petty and irrelevant. At this state, they are able to banish the thought of devoting their life to earthly profit and know what they truly deem fit, behaving in court as if surrounded by nothing but the wildness of woods. Guoxiang believed that Confucianism, the predominant ideological guidelines of the imperial ages, while inherently true, were distorted and used by those who sought personal gain from it. By retrieving one’s nature and following it, one is able to resist the temptation of self-interest and promptly engage in rectifying Confucian doctrines to produce positive social reforms.

There are many questions left unclarified in Guoxiang’s development of Neo-Daoism, such as why would one instinctively know that the right thing to do is to re-engage in the society, even political life, once one recognizes their true nature? What if one’s true nature is more concerned with their own happiness than that of the world at large when the two are apparently conflicting? In other words, facing the social upheaval and injustice that fueled Neo-Daoism in the first place, will one’s nature to fight always gain the upper-hand than flight?

More than a millennium later, the American Transcendentalism adopted a more individualistic answer to these questions. Influenced considerably by Asian mysticism, including Confucianism and Daoism, Transcendentalists sought mental comfort, intellectual elevation, and spiritual emancipation in mother nature as well. As the fruit of romanticism on protestant soil, nature is viewed to be the embodiment of divinity and the will of God. Nature provides providence and instruction to human soul, so long as one stays close to it and seek guidance from it. Yet, Emerson and Thoreau argued that by communicating and assimilating with nature one’s only purpose is to further one’s own moral development and attain one’s own eudaimonia. It is not necessary that one pass on the knowledge or seek to rectify the wrongness of society. Neither did Emerson and Thoreau try to provide an argument of the link between developing one’s nature and taking on reformist social actions. The Transcendentalists, most conspicuously, endorse individual lives rather than social progress.

Thus, whether a person would be prone to perfect themselves and harness their own happiness or work for the greater good of others once realizing their nature is an indefinite question, liable to different interpretations from intellectuals to serve different aims. Yet, one might still think that the latter is more probable for the altruistic quality people usually believe to be buried in human nature after all.