

JFLC

CHINESE LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES IN CROSS-CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE

Pursuit of “Emptiness” in Taoism and Seeking “Harmony” in Meditation: On the Taoist Thought in Paul Claudel’s Works¹

◎ YANG Yang

Hunan Normal University

Abstract: Paul Claudel was a famous French poet and playwright of the late 19th and the 20th centuries. He served as the French diplomat in China for 15 years. His living experiences in China marked his literary and poetic thoughts with a distinct Oriental imprint. Claudel admired Taoist philosophy, which not only influenced his outlook on life, but also penetrated into his poetry and dramatic creation. The poet extracted three central ideas from Taoist philosophy: the pursuit of Taoist emptiness, the Taoist meditation for non-action, and the unity of man with nature. He integrated the Taoist wisdom into his literary creation, which made his works not only exotic, but also manifested the charm of Taoist philosophy. Claudel’s interaction with Taoist thought was an attempt to integrate oriental aesthetics into the Christian spirit and forge a model of literary communication between the East and the West in the 20th century.

Keywords: Paul Claudel, Taoist philosophy, Chinese themes, Lao Tzu

CLC: I565

Document Code: A

Article ID: 2096-4374(2026)01-0083-14

DOI: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202601007

1. Introduction

Paul Claudel was a famous French poet and playwright in the late 19th and the 20th centuries. As a diplomat, he served as the French consul in China from 1895 to 1909 in Shanghai, Fuzhou, Wuhan, and Tianjin, during which time he created a large number of works, such as the collection of prose *Knowing the East* (*Connaissance de l’Est*), the poetic volume *Poetic Art* (*Art poétique*), the critical collection *Under the Sign of the Dragon* (*Sous le signe du dragon*), the poetry collection *Five Great Odes* (*Cinq grandes odes*), and the plays *The Rest of the Seventh Day* (*Le repos du septième jour*) and *Break of Noon* (*Partage de midi*). In addition, Chinese narratives also left a deep imprint on his later works created after his departure from China, such as the play *The Satin Slipper* (*Le soulier de satin*) and the poetry collection *A Hundred Phrases for Fans* (*Cent phrases*

pour eventails). It can be said that the experience of 15 years of living in China, as well as Chinese themes and culture, deeply influenced Claudel's view of literary creation.

The Chinese themes in Claudel's works mainly include Taoist philosophy, Chinese characters, the landscape, gardens, the weather, and so on. Among them, the poet especially admires Chinese Taoist philosophy. Taoism provides Claudel with rich creative inspiration and is ubiquitous in his writings from China.

Claudel had a very different attitude towards Buddhism and Taoism; he favored the latter over the former. As a Christian, Claudel showed antipathy and disgust towards Buddhism. In his *Prose Collection* (*Œuvre en prose*), Claudel says: "The bitter peace of Buddhist paradise [...] may not be far from hell" (829).² He even denounced Buddhist teachings as the "vicious fraud" (*Connaissance* 140). In his eyes, "Buddhism reflects an abstract and unreal world that indoctrinates people to go toward nothingness and reincarnation" (Houriez 22). Unlike Buddhism, Taoism affirms the real existence of the world and encourages mankind to love nature and follow the laws of nature. Claudel valued Taoist philosophy and liked to borrow aphorisms and ideas from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*:

Looking at his prose works, his reactions to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism in traditional Chinese culture are very different: he loves Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, hates Bodhisattvas, and is indifferent to Confucius. The philosophy he talked about most was Lao Tzu's thought, the term he talked about most was "emptiness," and the Chinese character he talked about most was "Tao." (Yu 168)

Xu Zhimian, the Chinese translator of *Knowing the East*, said, "In his [Claudel's] view, Lao Tzu's thought provides a new concept of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, breaks the trap of Western materialism, and spiritually remedies the contradiction between the real (material) and the imaginary (spirit), so as to bring balance to the human mind" (150). In the poet's eyes, Taoist philosophy is not religious thought but a philosophy of life. The Taoist aesthetics of emptiness and meditation and the concept of harmony between humans and nature are in accord with the poet's own philosophy of life.

Some French scholars have questioned the influence of Taoist thought on Claudel because the French version of *Tao Te Ching* was widely published in France only at the beginning of the 20th century,³ and therefore the poets of the late 19th century would not have been exposed to Taoist thought in advance. Gilbert Gadoffre, a famous French scholar and expert on Claudel, argued that "Claudel had read the English translation of Taoist thought introduced by James Legge,⁴ a famous British Sinologist, when he first came to China" (*Claudel* 286–287).

At the Claudel Foundation, we have preserved a manuscript written by the poet in 1896 that was later included in "A Break on the Canal" ("Halte sur le canal") in *Knowing the East*, in which the poet writes: "*Tao Te Ching* advocates emptiness, emptiness makes the spoke of wheel useful, and allows the Qin (琴) to play harmonious music" (*Connaissance* 115). This also proves that the poet had read *Tao Te Ching* before he came to China. Xu also said, "In *Knowing the East*, there is an essay 'A Break on the Canal,' and later in the academic reports he made in France, Claudel quoted several times chapter 11 of *Tao Te Ching*" (150). In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu says:

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel; But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the wheel depends. We turn clay to make a vessel; But it is on the

space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends. We pierce doors and windows to make a house; And it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends. Therefore just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the usefulness of what is not. (155)

From this, it can be confirmed that Claudel had been in contact with Lao Tzu's thought before he came to China, and his aesthetic view left the imprint of Taoist thought. After arriving in China, Claudel continued to accumulate and expand his knowledge and understanding of Taoist thought, and gradually extracted three central ideas from Taoist philosophy: the tendency toward emptiness, the aesthetics of meditation for non-action, and the unity of nature and man, and presented these philosophical ideas repeatedly in his works. As the French poet Victor Segalen said after his first meeting with Claudel in 1909, "Like me, he went to *Tao Te Ching* as soon as he arrived in China, to the profound philosophy of Lao Tzu" (63).

2. Interaction of Being and Not-Being and the Pursuit of Emptiness in Claudel's Writing

Lao Tzu says:

It is because every one under Heaven recognizes beauty as beauty, that the idea of ugliness exists. And equally if every one recognized virtue as virtue, this would merely create fresh conceptions of wickedness. For truly, Being and Not-being grow out of one another; Difficult and easy complete one another. Long and short test one another; High and low determine one another. Pitch and mode give harmony to one another; Front and back give sequence to one another. Therefore, the Sage relies on actionless activity. (143)

From his point of view, nothing or Not-being is born out of Being, and Being is born out of Not-being. The beauty is called beauty because of the existence of ugliness, and Being is called Being because of the existence of Not-being. Thus, existence and non-existence are both relative and dependent, and the two can be transformed into each other.

Claudel believes that "the two opposites, Yin and Yang, are intimately connected" (*Sous le signe* 101). When one is dominant, the other exists in the simplest way, and just like Being and Not-being, Yin and Yang grow out of one another and alternate with each other. In *Under the Sign of the Dragon*, the writer says: "The circle is formed by the deformation of Yin and Yang, which is the core power of cosmic space. It is a spinning machine, a spinning soul, a turbine that turns without resistance, without energy loss, and never stops turning. When Yang reaches its peak, Yin begins to replace it. One is the starting point for the other" (101). This description is basically consistent with the Taoist view of Yin and Yang. Claudel believed that all things in the world develop and evolve in the two movements of Yin and Yang, and the two things are opposite and complement each other, and they are not mutually exclusive. As a result, Claudel put it: "The Chinese put forward the concept of contradiction long before Hegel" (*Œuvre en prose* 1081).

The transformation of Being and Not-being, as well as Yin and Yang, led Claudel to discover

a philosophy of alternation. Claudel called the infinite alternation of Yin and Yang the “unceasing pendulum,” and said: “Life is the path to death, and death is the path to life. When ‘qi’ [气] gathers, one lives. When ‘qi’ disperses, one dies” (*Sous le signe* 98). This is consistent with the theory of Chuang Tzu, who says: “The life is due to the collection of the breath. When that is collected, there is life; when it is dispersed, there is death. Since death and life thus attend on each other, why should I account them an evil?” (107). Chuang Tzu regarded life as the condensation of “qi” and death as the dissipation of “qi,” thus advocating that life should follow the changes of the four seasons and the laws of nature. However, it is cruel to mankind, because life is lived only once, and the end of life is destined to be death. From the Taoist theory of Yin and Yang, Claudel also discovered the rhythm of poetry; he said, “Sound unfolds in time, and is ultimately controlled by a meter, which is the internal metronome brought by the chest, the beat of our life, and the heart keeps saying: ‘Bang, bang, bang [...] Empty, empty, empty [...]’ The essence of the rhythm is the alternations of the strong and weak beats” (*Œuvre en prose* 4).

According to Gadoffre, “Claudel discovers a balance in Taoist philosophy, which is not only a balance of Yin and Yang in the universe, but also a rhythm inherent in the human body, a rhythm of the body’s respiration, a rhythm of the verse” (“Claudel” 160). The poet connected iambic poetry with Yin-Yang philosophy, and regarded the iambic poetry as breathing and heartbeat, just as Qin Haiying said, “an iambic poem becomes the breathing process of life, the breath of life that can be felt” (29).

For Claudel, Taoist thought stems from thinking about the relationship between humans and nature. “I think Chinese metaphysics can be simply divided into two categories: one is change, everything changes; the second is that all activities originate within things” (*Sous le signe* 97). Change means that everything in the world changes, with the seasons and with the pace of farming. The Chinese nation is not a nomadic nation, but a sedentary nation that attaches importance to agriculture. In Claudel’s view, farming civilization shaped the attributes of Chinese culture that focus on the volatility of weather, the change of seasons, and the transformation of natural energies. This echoes the view of the French scholar Jacques Gernet, who said: “The Judeo-Christian God is the God of the nomads, who ponder over biblical metaphors, and therefore the Bible speaks, commands, and demands. The Chinese God does not speak; he merely invents the seasons and gives instructions through the change of seasons” (*Chine et christianisme* 206).

Claudel was influenced by French symbolism in his early years, so when he came into contact with Taoist thought, which also had a naturalistic tendency, the poet showed special interest. He believed that Taoist “Not-being” is the basis of all things; just like Lao Tzu said, “Being and Not-being grow out of one another.” “Being” and “Not-being” are the presentation of different states of things; “Being” must rely on the “Not-being” to prove its values, otherwise there will be no sense of existence. Just as in the art of paper-cutting, it is impossible to present a picture without cutting off part of the paper. The “emptiness” set off the “Being,” and thus “Being” and “Not-being” are born together. The space where human beings live is the hollow place between heaven and earth, and “emptiness” creates human existence.

Léon Wieger, the French sinologist who translated Taoist philosophy for a European audience, wrote in his book *Lectures on Philosophy (Textes philosophiques)*: “When we talk about how creatures can be void and ethereal, my answer is: Isn’t it like the hollowness of a wheel? It is empty that makes the wheel turn. Isn’t it because a vessel is hollow that it has the attributes of a container? When a door or window is opened, the house becomes hollow so that things can

pass through. Thus, existence and non-existence are interdependent" (263). According to French scholar Yvan Daniel, "Since 1896, Claudel had been exposed to Taoist philosophy through Léon Wiegier's translations and in the poems 'Here and There' and 'Tao Te Ching'" (331). Claudel not only borrowed Lao Tzu's concepts of "wheel," "vessel," "door," and "window" in *Knowing the East* to re-interpret his understanding of "emptiness," but also re-interpreted the Taoist concept of duality in *Poetic Art*, in which he argued that "from the concepts of beauty, goodness and existence, human beings put forward the concepts of ugliness, evil, and emptiness, and that the two concepts are both opposite and interdependent" (*Art poétique* 144).

In the prose piece "Poet and Censer," Claudel shows the same hobby as Lao Tzu, who "likes to suckle breast milk of his mother." Lao Tzu says, "But wherein I most am different from men is that I prize no sustenance that comes not from the mother's breast" (169). Mother here refers to the origin of things, i.e. Tao. The difference between Lao Tzu and the others is that he fully explores the origin of all things and the truth of life, thinking about "who am I?" "Where do I come from?" And "Where am I going?" Claudel says almost the same thing as Lao Tzu: "I am different from others, and my favorite is 'mother'" (*Œuvre en prose* 1156). The poet adds, "Is it wrong for us to call this essence, this mysterious flavor, this quiver of truth, the milk that enlightens us, mother? We are in the midst of nature, like a litter of piglets sucking the milk of their dead mother. Didn't Lao Tzu tell us to close our eyes and to suck the source of all creation with our mouth?" (1174). Just as Daniel said, "Claudel referenced the concept of 'mother' as 'Tao' in Taoist thought" (331). For Claudel, the meaning of "mother" in his works contains a kind of implication of Chinese Tao.

Regarding death, Lao Tzu adopts a naturalistic and open-minded attitude. "A hurricane never lasts a whole morning, nor a rainstorm all day. Who is it that makes the wind and rains? It is Heaven and Earth. And if even Heaven and Earth cannot blow or pour for long. How much less in his utterance should man?" (172). All things are born between heaven and earth and return to them, and death is the inevitable destination. In Chuang Tzu's view, death is the best state for life to return to the basics and nature. "Death and life are ordained, just as we have the constant succession of night and day; in both cases from Heaven. Man has no power to do anything in reference to them; such is the constitution of things" (29). Chuang Tzu believed that when people died, there would be no more troubles in the world, and death was just a natural state of people returning to their true nature. At the end of *The Rest of the Seventh Day*, the emperor returns from hell and says, "I belong to death, and I must return to my mother" (*Le repos* 151). The Emperor introduces a key concept—the mother. Mother is synonymous with Not-being and emptiness, is the source of all things in the world. The emperor expresses his attachment to Mother Earth, the land that gives birth to life, and the life that returns to the earth after death. This return is not the cycle of life advocated by Buddhism, but towards the absolute and purity. Death doesn't mean a black void, but another manifestation of existence. The return to death is to go to one's birthplace, to return to Mother Earth. The earth symbolizes both mother and death. That is why Claudel's emperor leaves behind everything on earth and seeks "a dialogue with the absolute and the immutable" (155). Instead of seeking eternal life toward Yin and Yang, the emperor chooses to move from life to death and ultimately to remain in the underworld forever.

In *The Rest of the Seventh Day*, the earth before creation is a blue abyss with a hollow space separating heaven and earth. Lao Tzu says, "Yet Heaven and Earth and all that lies between is like a bellows in that it is empty, but gives a supply that never fails. Work it, and more comes out. Whereas the force of words is soon spent. Far better is it to keep what is in the heart"

(147). According to Lao Tzu, between heaven and earth, the world is just like a bellows; if no one pulls it, it will be empty and quiet, once pulled, the wind blows. Do not be self-righteous and presumptuous. We need to know that talking too much takes us away from “Tao,” while meditation in quietude brings us closer to “Tao.” The emperor interprets again Lao Tzu’s thought, “I come to the deep, up, forward, back, left, right, and down. You are everywhere, but you are neither up nor down. You have neither size nor width, nor form nor appearance; what I see in front of me is empty. [...] (You) are like a bottle, a bellows, or a lute. Emptiness makes you exist, like a wheel with spokes attached; emptiness makes the wheel turn. Thus, all things are made of your emptiness” (Caudel, *Le repos* 155). In an interview, when talking about Taoist thought, Claudel said, “It is the emptiness that gives value to everything. This is a kind of Taoist thought” (Caudel and Fournier 89). Emptiness is the intermediate pivot between the earthly world and the purity, which helps the emperor to get out of the earthly world, to enter the vacuum, and gradually to move towards the divine. Through a state of contemplation and meditation, the emperor is eventually enlightened, becomes wise, and moves toward the absolute. “Oh, the majesty of life, my eyes are gone, and my gravity has become a subtle significance, and with the help of the forces that maintain the balance of the universe, I stand still [...] All the significance of my existence dissolves into a wisdom” (Caudel, *Le repos* 149).

Although Claudel was fascinated by Eastern Taoism, as a representative writer of the French Catholic Literary Revival Movement, he always kept his distance from Chinese Taoism, with Christian thought remaining the ideological pillar of his creation. He said, “I am not a Hindu ascetic.... It is not my thought at all, nor will I ever lose my personal feelings” (Caudel and Fournier 151). It is for this reason that Claudel constantly explored the deep meaning of “emptiness,” and then, on the basis of the positive meaning of emptiness, he extracted the negativity of emptiness and the relationship between emptiness and the lack of human spirit. Claudel began to question the “emptiness” of Taoism. Although “emptiness” connects everything in the world and gives things the meaning of existence, it comes from the lack of human spirit and the lack of religious belief. In *The Rest of the Seventh Day*, it is the lack of faith in God that causes human society to decay and fall. “Emptiness” creates all things, but also forces human beings to go to the abyss of hell. Although Taoism greatly influences the Chinese emperor in the novel, it is Christianity, not Taoism, that ultimately saves him and his people. At the end of the play, the Chinese emperor holds up a rod in the shape of a cross to conquer the rebels, and he tells his subjects the will of Heaven: work for the first six days and rest for worship on the seventh. Yu also believes that, “The playwright’s prescription for the Chinese emperor is to convert to Catholicism rather than to any other religion. *The Rest of the Seventh Day* is nothing but the worship of the Sabbath” (162). The author’s intention is to let the light of Christ shine on the land of the East and the theme of the play is undoubtedly the victory of Catholicism over another civilization of “barbarians.” Because for Claudel, “‘Tao’ is a path to God” (Houriez 32). Claude has always distinguished the mystical Eastern philosophy from the Christian faith, and the Taoist thought is only a booster to promote the character’s thought, and in the end, only God can inspire the character’s qualitative change, so that they can achieve self-salvation. In a word, nihilism, Oriental naturalism, and Catholicism are perfectly integrated in Claudel’s works, which constitute the poet’s unique literary creation view.

3. The Non-action and Quietude of Taoism in Claudel's Works

Lao Tzu advocates doing things in accordance with the laws of nature, the laws of society, and the well-being of the people; not acting rashly, not acting in disorder; the self-restraint of the people; and the king not fighting with the people so as to reach the "rule by doing nothing" of the country. Lao Tzu emphasizes: "So long as I do nothing, the people will of themselves be transformed. So long as I love quietude, the people will of themselves go straight. So long as I act only by inactivity the people will of themselves prosper. So long as I have no wants, the people will of themselves return to the state of the Uncarved Block" (211).

Claudel drew sustenance from the Taoist idea of "non-action" and used it in his literary creation. In *Under the Sign of the Dragon*, the author mentions 12 moral commandments of Lao Tzu, ten of which involve emptiness and two of which involve non-action. "Taoism regards emptiness as sublime and encourages people to enter into an unrestrained state. For example, the Taoists tell us that the sage acts and governs by doing nothing, which is a continuous state of unconstraint, trying to keep himself in a simple and unrestrained state under various circumstances" (103). This is just as Lao Tzu says in the Chapter 49 of *Tao Te Ching*: "The Sage has no heart of his own; He uses the heart of the people as his heart. Of the good man I approve, but of the bad I also approve, and thus he gets goodness" (202). In the drama *City*, the protagonist often shows the Taoist idea of non-action. He believes that there is a cosmic harmony above the earth and the living soul, that there is a force of inaction and, no matter how humans struggle with nature and fate, it is futile. "I was all alone, like a depressed melancholy man, and I wandered on the road. I am ascetic in search of truth, thinking about how human society can be truly peaceful and calm, and I refuse to act because man's confrontation with nature is futile. Only by following the steps of nature and listening to the voice of God can I find inner peace" (Claudel, *Théâtre* 30–31). Although his discourse has a strong Christian color, it also shows the influence of Taoism on him. The theory of non-action makes the poet discover an aesthetic of meditation and quietude. In the *Collection of Poems (Œuvre poétique)*, Claudel interprets Lao Tzu's thoughts into poetic language: "I am drifting on the sea, a plaything of the wind, I have no purpose, no destination. Everything has its own power, and I, like a savage, am foolish" (1289). The traces of the thought of Lao Tzu in this poem are obvious. Lao Tzu says that his mind is as vast, tranquil, and quiet as the sea, like the wind, with no purpose and no destination. Everyone seems to have a purpose, all have a purpose, but he is stupid and humble. Different from others, Lao Tzu considers the Tao of heaven and earth as his best spiritual food. As he says in *Tao Te Ching*: "I seem unsettled as the ocean, blown adrift, never brought to a stop. All men can be put to some use, I alone am intractable and boorish" (169).

In the second poem of *Poems of Exile (Vers d'exil)*, the poet inherits the Taoist philosophy of non-action. The poet tries to conform to the laws of nature and the laws of the universe, and pursues a state of inaction. Despite the omnipresent desire, he refuses to act and cannot act. "I don't play anymore, and I don't feel joy anymore. When I work, I no longer have fun" (*Œuvre poétique* 14). The poet expresses his rejection of work, study, and action, which is a view of inaction, and which accords with Lao Tzu's "theory of the futility of study." This is exactly the dialectic thought of Lao Tzu; he encourages the common people to stop learning from the sages and to refuse to learn, because reading will make people compare, comparison then makes people become utilitarian, and utilitarianism and desire ultimately make society unharmonious. This view

of non-action is not a passive acceptance of life, but a state of quietude of mind and heart. As Claudel says, “I am alone, I wait, I observe [...] I merely listen, I wait” (16). Thus, Non-action and passivity become a force. In addition, Claudel expresses the insignificance and stupidity of human beings and utilizes various paradoxical techniques to illustrate his unique understanding of “Tao.” “I speak and yet I am silent, I am deaf and yet I hear” (14). In the poet’s view, “Tao” is ineffable and formless. This is consistent with the words of Lao Tzu: “Because the eye gazes but can catch no glimpse of it, it is called elusive. Because the ear listens but cannot hear it, it is called the rarefied. [...] They are called shapeless shapes, forms without form, are called vague semblance” (15). Claudel refuses to speak and act, recognizes man’s impotence and stupidity in the face of nature; he is like a wise man, an observer, waiting to see what the forces of nature have in store for him. In the fifth poem of the *Poems of Exile*, Claudel shows his aversion to all “noise,” writing “I want to suffocate you,” and uses the words “shut up” several times in a row: “Heart please shut up; breath please shut up” (19–20). The image of “quietness” emphasized by Claudel is a kind of Taoist wisdom. Quietness makes people more able to discover the essence of the world, which makes non-action become action, and action through non-action. In the ninth poem, the poet searches for a kind of peace and quiet, and he desires to discover an inner “emptiness” through blindness. Claudel says: “I don’t want to see, I don’t want to speak, in blindness I find eternity” (27). In Lao Tzu’s view, “The five colors confuse the eye, the five sounds dull the ear, the five tastes spoil the palate” (156). Only by giving up the pursuit of color, sound, and taste, and letting the mind be at peace without any attempt to enjoy, can we find simplicity and serenity and return to our inherent innocence. In short, in *Poems of Exile*, Claudel deciphers several chapters of *Tao Te Ching* and incorporates them into his own verses, integrating Lao Tzu’s thoughts with his own poetic thoughts.

In Claudel’s writing, the China of the late Qing Dynasty is neither noisy and backward nor brilliant, but presents a peaceful and quiet scene. Natural scenery such as water, moon, and sunset present bland and mild colors. The gardens in the countryside are white, and autumn is a dull and neutral season. Claudel is particularly interested in the autumn, because the blandness pervades the whole season. In his letter to Stéphane Mallarmé, he says, “October brings us a wonderful autumn, which is no longer the tragedy of spring and the heat of summer” (Mondor and Moreau 50). Autumn allows us to discover the beauty of the Chinese landscape with the increase of drizzle and mists, which are also Chinese imagery in Claudel’s writing. While working in Fuzhou, the poet experienced the rainy weather there. Shrouded in gloom and mist, the scenery takes on a black and white color. Blandness is not only an aesthetic view, but also a natural state of the world. Lao Tzu says: “Those that have little, may get more. Those that have much, are but perplexed” (171). According to Taoist thought, the brilliant color makes people unable to see the essence, and the glamorous appearance makes people lose themselves, so people should maintain inner peace and pursue a natural and simple lifestyle. Autumn is often endowed with a kind of plain and simple aesthetic, characteristics autumn is consistent with: the aesthetics of blandness, an ideal state, at which time all strong colors of summer are gradually faded and diluted. Meanwhile, autumn is different from the sad and dark colors of winter, which present a bland and simple color.

As the landscape fades, so do the sounds. The gardens become silent and the clanging of the temple bells is like the sound of a slight drop of water. In the poem “December” (“Décembre”), the world is compared to a deserted theater, a closed landscape where we hear nothing. But the quieter it is, the more we perceive our own presence, as in “Time in the Garden” (“Heures dans le

jardin"): "Quiet is so delicate it can penetrate the barriers, the sound of a mouse two stories away, the sound of a louse under a pigeon's belly, the sound of a dandelion on its fragile root, all like the sound of the door opening in my house" (167).

The blandness of colors and the weakening of sounds is imagery that *Knowing the East* presents to readers. The blend of oriental landscape painting, Taoist philosophy, and symbolist techniques gives Claudel's poems a special exotic and serene imagery. The plain color and the absence of strong color present a Taoist harmony which is Claudel's perception of Taoism as an observer and a contemplator. As a result, most of the poems in *Knowing the East* show a bland color and neutral tone, and any kind of excessive tone, strong color, or abrupt element is a sign of disruption of balance. In this tone, even the light of noon is described by the poet as a dull moonlight. In the midday when daylight is strong, flames and sounds turn white. Claudel prefers to end the poems with a sunset scene, thereby presenting an image of fading, dilution, and serenity.

4. Taoist Harmony of Man and Nature in Claudel's Works

Lao Tzu believes that man was an integral part of nature and that he should follow the law of "Tao." "Just as Tao has this greatness, and as earth has it and as heaven has it, so may the ruler also have it" (174). Here, Lao Tzu puts forward four existences, namely, "Tao," "Heaven," "Earth," and "Man," with "Tao" in the first place, which is the earliest theory of "unity of heaven and man" in ancient Chinese philosophy. Taoism advocates the law of nature and non-action to achieve harmony and unity of man and nature. In Chuang Tzu's philosophy, heaven and man are opposites. While heaven represents nature, man refers to "man-made," the "artificial," and everything that deviates from nature. Furthermore, obeying the "way of heaven," so as to communicate with heaven and earth, and realize the unity of heaven and man, is the concept of nature advocated by Chuang Tzu. Just as he says, "He who knows the part which the heavenly in him plays, and knows also that which the Human in him ought to play, has reached the perfection of knowledge" (27). Chuang Tzu advocates obedience to the way of heaven, while rejecting "artificiality."

Completely different from Eastern Taoism, Western Christianity holds a dualistic view of the relationship between man and nature. In the view of Christianity, all things in the world were created by God, but among the creatures, only human beings are created by God in his own image, and only human beings have souls. Therefore, God loves human beings most, hoping that human beings can conquer nature and multiply from generation to generation. Christianity provides the most favorable theoretical support for anthropocentrism.

According to Genesis, man is the master of nature, man is clearly superior to other forms of life, and God created all things to serve man. Therefore, man's dominion over nature is absolute and unconditional. Early Christianity not only separated man from nature, God from nature, but also opposed the animism which unites man and nature. According to Christianity, only God is divine, and natural objects do not have any soul. It is the epistemological difference between Taoism and Christianity that makes Claudel's works show a kind of ambiguity and contradiction. The two are in struggle and there exists a relation in that as one falls, another rises—which makes it difficult for the readers to define the poet's world-view. In *The Rest of the Seventh Day*, the Chinese emperor who believes in Taoism is finally saved by Christianity; in *Knowing the East*, "I"

is not only a Western diplomat who believes in Christianity, but also an Eastern poet who believes in Taoism.

Claudel also presents in *Knowing the East* the reconciliation between man and nature. “I” is a passive receiver, a subject who focuses on listening and not on moving. “I” listens to the world without showing any resistance. Nature shows him the way forward. In the “Night Voyage” (“La navigation nocturne”), although the river has many tributaries, the boatman does not consider which path to take, but lets the boat quietly follow the current. “Our bow swivels and wobbles, we let it be. [...] There were innumerable branching streams along the canal. We moved onward in silence, with our eyes on the great, infinitely, lonely star in the sky” (*Connaissance* 112). In “The Stroller” (“Le promeneur”), the poet follows the guidance of the outside world, and although there are many paths, he moves forward at will, letting the road take him wherever it will. “I am wandering alone on the road that has collapsed. I am going nowhere, strolling with neither purpose nor aim” (129). And the lack of desire guides me “to feel the charm of all things in my quiet heart” (130). In “Time in the Garden,” the poet expresses the subtle attention of “I” to the outside world: “I am in this enclosure, my every move is printed with caution and silent vigilance, like a fisherman afraid of disturbing the water and scaring away the fish” (168). Claudel expresses an idea similar to that of Lao Tzu, who observes his surroundings, speaks little, acts little, keeps vigilant. In “Dream” (“Rêves”), the anglers enter a state of meditation, in which they gain access to the deeper nature of things by keeping still. The anglers seem immobile and still, but their thoughts extend infinitely. Contemplative fishing changes one’s vision and enlightens one’s soul. The “Great Bell” (“La cloche”) shows the keen perception of the wise man, who can hear all the bells, hear the subtle sounds that ordinary people cannot detect, and hear the “silent music” of the universe. “Only the wise sage can still hear the first bell ringing in the air from the heaven, and when the sun is setting, he can hear the second bell ringing at the bottom of the vast, deep, muddy river” (103). The wise man, while perceiving the sound of silence, the soundless voice, also moves towards perfection and the sublime. Claudel is keen to insert contemplation into narratives on various themes, such as walking, visiting, waiting, lazing, vacationing, etc., presenting to his readers numerous moments of “transcendence.” The “I” often escapes from historical time, from the real existence of the self, and enters a vacuum of neutrality. This state of being is simple and instantaneous, and it is closer to nature, and helps “me” to understand instantly the world and nature.

In *Under the Sign of the Dragon*, Claudel explains the differences between Eastern and Western thoughts.

In the West, from Plato’s dialectics to Scholasticism and Cartesian philosophy, philosophy is dominated by the ubiquitous and incomparable genius of Aristotle. This philosophy is based on the opposition and difference between “Yes” and “No,” and completely excludes the conversion and interaction of the two. [...] In short, Westerners create an external world based on self-consciousness. Lao Tzu’s Eastern philosophy, on the other hand, stems from a meditation on eternity and balance, an unquestionable balance in which all things transform and check each other, and in which human beings learn to obey the laws of nature. (97–98)

Claudel did not want to compare the Eastern and Western philosophy, but tried to introduce Eastern philosophy into Western thought and encourage readers to observe nature and perceive the world with Taoist philosophy. The poet unconsciously integrates the Chinese view of natural

aesthetics into his poems: "The land occupied by the Chinese people has almost no difference and boundary, only the difference between the sea and the sky, and they are more sensitive to the changes of the sky and the balance of all things" (*Sous le signe* 100–101).

When human activities are involved in nature, the original "plain" "bland" characteristics of nature are changed, and the opposition between man and nature leads to disharmony. Therefore, to maintain harmony, human beings must return to flatness, to non-action, the aesthetic view that allows humans to connect everything in the world. In the titles of the poems of *Knowing the East*, there is no specific place name, only "city," "garden," "tower," "river," "flower," and other general nouns. The absence of place names and dates highlights the plain feature of the poems and avoids the intervention of subjective colors and personal emotions in the works. Claudel tried to present a Taoist view of harmony through this kind of plain inaction, with the help of words without too much subjective color. In "Drifting" ("La dérivation"), the author's intention is more obvious, and Taoist images such as quiet, harmony, and the plain can be seen everywhere. The narrator "I" focuses on observing all things in nature and is keen on listening to the voice of the universe. The landscape is diluted in "amber" and "turquoise" and finally disappears in the night. Trees, rivers, and other natural objects are no longer dependent on human existence; whether human attention is paid to it or not, the scenery presents a state of being and existence. In "Melting" ("Dissolution"), Claudel paints a picture of the fusion of man and nature, "Everything has melted, and I seek traces and shapes around me in vain. Nothing, as far as the horizon can see, but the end of the deepest and most intense color" (*Connaissance* 202).

Water, as the most mundane substance, appears repeatedly in *Tao Te Ching* because it best embodies the Taoist spirit. Lao Tzu says: "The highest good is like that of water. The goodness of it is that it benefits the ten thousand creatures, yet itself does not scramble, but is content with the places that all man disdain. It is this makes water so near to the Way" (151). In Claudel's works, water is the most insipid material. Water is colorless, odorless, invisible, and boundless, it flows with the tide and moves with the waves. Nature is full of water molecules so that "everything becomes the water" (*Connaissance* 202). Even the sky is a space made up of water, "there is nothing in the sky but the mist and the water" (202). The characteristics of water, which is transparent, colorless, plain, neutral, and compliant with all things, perfectly fit Claudel's aesthetic view. In "Reflections on the Sea" ("Pensée en mer"), the scenery is blended with water, rain, and sea. "The ship passes between the islands; The sea was so calm and empty as if nothing existed. It's eleven o'clock in the morning, and I wonder if it's raining" (31). In Claudel's writing, water breaks the distinctions and boundaries of all things and integrates the whole world. In "Risk at Sea" ("Le risque de la mer"), the water flows with the trend, has no desire and embodies non-action, achieving a perfect integration with the world. The poet absorbs and inherits Taoist thought, not only regarding water as the source of all things, but also knows how to use the image of water to explain the philosophical idea of harmony of man and nature and the unity of heaven and man.

In *Knowing the East*, Claudel expresses a harmonious view of nature from the perspective of a stroller. The poet says, "Every tree has its own character, every little animal has its own role, and every sound has its place in the symphony" (130). This view of harmony is more clearly expressed in *A Hundred Phrases for Fans*. The poet not only pays attention to "understanding" the East, but also pays more attention to the "symbiosis"⁵ between self and the East, self and nature. On the basis of continuous accumulation and reflection, the poet integrates nature and self, so that the existence of self resonates with the change of seasons and the rhythm of nature. Any human

activity will hear the echoes of nature, and every poem in *A Hundred Phrases for Fans* is an interpretation about harmonious nature, which constitutes together a harmonious symphony. The author has repeatedly taken the moon as the theme to show his own view of harmony. The theme of the moon is the author's celebration of darkness: with the darkness we love the light more, with the moon we know more about the sun. The moon theme is integrated into the author's view of harmony and reflects Claudel's unique understanding of everything in the world.

In addition, the poet shows the relationship between breathing and inspiration in *A Hundred Phrases for Fans*. The explosion of inspiration does not come purely from the author's will, but from the breathing instinct. What the poet breathes is not air, but scenery and inspiration. Breathing is no longer just a simple physiological behavior. Through breathing, people realize mutual cognition and symbiosis between themselves and the outside world. In sentence 136, the poet illustrates the initiative of breathing, which makes the "self" produce value, and enables me to resonate and coexist with the outside world. "I breathed the scenery, and now, to emphasize, I kept my breath" (128). After inhaling, I once again became the master of inspiration, the master of my "self." In *Knowing the East*, the poet perceives the beauty of stillness and demonstrates the aesthetics of meditation. In *A Hundred Phrases for Fans*, the poet shows a deeper understanding of Eastern aesthetics, integrates an interaction between mankind and nature in the static beauty, and uses a positive poetic language to present his understanding of the unity of nature and mankind. As Gernet puts it: "For Claudel, Taoism attempts to explore and interpret the human condition rather than encouraging human escape and retreat. A kind of complementarity unites the human beings, the emotional and active subject, with the world, the passive object" (*L'intelligence* 35).

5. Conclusion

Claudel has an indissoluble relationship with Taoist philosophy, and Taoist thought is undoubtedly an important source of ideas for Claudel's literary creation. The language of Claudel's poems is bland, depicting a picture of quietude. This blandness is not a pessimistic theory of extinction; on the contrary, the poems are full of the vigor of life. Rather than a loud praise of life, the poems present a neutral color, showing the vibrant vitality and integration of all things in the world. As Lao Tzu says, "Great music has the faintest notes, the great form is without shape" (193). Claudel inspires the reader "not only to hear the world with the ears and see it with the eyes, but to perceive it with the soul" (*Œuvre poétique* 108). In the process of "my" meditative observation and contemplative perception, man and nature reach a kind of reconciliation and gradually realize the state of unity between heaven and man. Claudel tries to present to the readers a philosophy of life, of emptiness and blandness; an oriental scroll with a unique aesthetic charm of meditation.

In short, the Taoist concepts of "emptiness," "non-action," and "harmony between man and nature" influenced Claudel's creativity, manifesting in his works through a profound exploration of the human spirit, a natural flow of expression, and a deep appreciation for the harmonious coexistence between humanity and the natural world. The influence of these Taoist thoughts gives Claudel's works a unique philosophical depth and humanistic concern.

However, if we examine the relationship between Claude and Tao, we will find that the "Tao" in his mind is not the "Tao" known by Chinese people, and his cognition of Tao only stays in

the aesthetic understanding of artistic creation. He uses Lao Tzu's "Tao" to explore his own way of literary creation, rather than entering into a real dialogue and interaction with Chinese Taoist thought. Or, "Understanding China means going beyond oneself, passing through China, and returning to the European self in order to attain a form of self-knowledge" (Zhang and Li 74), a sentiment which echoes the French sinologist François Jullien's "detour and entry." In Jullien's view, the philosophical thinking of China as the other provides a useful perspective for the European to observe themselves "from the outside" (38). Just as Chinese scholar Zhang Longxi said: "The discussion of China and China as a 'heterotopia' is really a discussion of Europe's self-discovery and self-understanding, in which China offers a different tool for philosophical thinking" (Zhang and Li 74).

According to the aesthetic view of Claudel's Catholic poetics, pious people can find and understand this "Tao" arranged by God through artistic, intellectual, and spiritual activities. Therefore, one could attain the artistic realm of the unity of body, spirit, and the outside world with the inspiration of God if he abandons the pursuit of secular distractions and returns to the nature of kindness. It can be seen that the Chinese "Tao" borrowed by Claudel is a means or a literary creation tool rather than the goal of literary and philosophical exploration. As Yu said, "Under the influence of Chinese traditional culture, Claudel borrowed the meaning of 'emptiness' from Eastern philosophy in his pursuit of 'Tao' in poetics, and transplanted a large number of Oriental 'trees' into the Western 'forest' under the rule of Almighty God" (170–171).

Notes

1. This paper is supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (Project No. 23BWW068: "The Chinese Writing and Cultural Misreading in 20th Century French Poetry").
2. The original text is in French, and the English translation of the quoted passages is provided by the author.
3. Although the *Tao Te Ching* was translated into French in the first half of the 19th century by the renowned sinologist Julien Stanislas, the book did not enjoy wide circulation after publication, as it had long been regarded with disfavor by the Jesuits. It was not until 1906 that the French sinologist Léon Wiegier published his *Lectures on Philosophy (Textes philosophiques)*, which became an important French work on Taoist thought. In 1913, Léon Wiegier published *The Fathers of the System Taoism (Les Pères du Système Taoïsme)*, introducing the thought of major Taoist figures such as Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and Lie Tzu. Some scholars have questioned the influence of Taoism on Claudel because these two works of Léon Wiegier appeared later than several of Claudel's works.
4. In *The Chinese Classics*, James Legge, a famous British sinologist, gave a more comprehensive introduction to the thoughts of the ancient philosophers before the Qin dynasties, including the main ideas and works of Taoists Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu.
5. Some scholars believe that in the title of *Knowing the East (Connaissance de l'Est)*, Claudel used the rhetorical device of the homophone. The French word "connaissance" means "knowing," and the other pronunciation "co-naissance" means "living together." Therefore, it can be understood that while the poet knows the East, he also has a sense of symbiosis with the East.

Works Cited

- Claudel, Paul. *Cent phrases pour éventails*. Gallimard, 1996.
- . *Œuvre poétique*. Gallimard, 1967.
- . *Théâtre*. Vol. I. Gallimard, 1967.
- . *Le repos du septième jour*. Mercure de France, 1965.
- . *Œuvre en prose*. Gallimard, 1965.
- . *Sous le signe du dragon*. La Table Ronde, 1948.
- . *Connaissance de l'Est*. Larousse, 1920.
- . *Art poétique*. Mercure de France, 1907.
- Claudel, Paul, and Louis Fournier. *Mémoires improvisés*. Gallimard, 2001.
- Chuang Tzu. *The Writings of Chuang Tzu*. Translated by James Legge, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1891.
- Daniel, Yvan. *Paul Claudel et l'empire du milieu*. Indes Savantes, 2003.
- Gadoffre, Gilbert. "Claudel et la Chine du tao." *Claudel en Chine*, edited by Pierre Brunel and Yvan Daniel, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013, pp. 157–166.
- . *Claudel et l'univers chinois*. Gallimard, 1968.
- Gernet, Jacques. *Chine et christianisme: la première confrontation*. Gallimard, 1982.
- . *L'intelligence de la Chine*. Gallimard, 1944.
- Houriez, Jacques. *Paul Claudel rencontre l'Asie du tao*. Honoré Champion, 2016.
- Jullien, François, and Thierry Marchaisse. *Penser d'un dehors (la Chine): entretiens d'extrême-occident*. Editions du Seuil, 2000.
- Lao Tzu. *The Way and Its Power: A Study of Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought*. Translated by Arthur Waley, Grove Press, 1958.
- Mondor, Henri, and Pierre Moreau, editors. *Cahiers Paul Claudel I*. Gallimard, 1959.
- Qin, Haiying. "Le souffle du vers chez Claudel et le Qi littéraire en Chine." *Paul Claudel et la Chine*, edited by Qinggang Du and Jing Wang, Wuhan UP, 2010, pp. 27–37.
- Segalen, Victor. *Lettre de Chine*. Plon, 1967.
- Wieger, Léon. *Textes philosophiques*. Forgotten Books, 2018.
- Xu, Zhimian. "Claudel and *Connaissance de l'Est*" [克洛岱尔与《认识东方》]. *Contemporary Foreign Literature* [当代外国文学], no. 3, 1991, pp. 147–150.
- Yu, Zhongxian. "Claudel and Chinese Traditional Culture" [克洛岱尔与中国传统文化]. *World Literature* [世界文学], no. 3, 1995, pp. 158–172.
- Zhang, Longxi, and Boting Li. "The Beauty of the Exotic" [异域情调之美]. *Foreign Literature* [外国文学], no.2, 2002, pp. 70–74.