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Laozi's precepts for daily life in the contemporary world: two popular Western (American) interpretations

Abstract

The paper aims to discuss two popular interpretations of Daoism and its application to contemporary world: *The Dao of PooH* by Benjamin Hoff and *The Truth of Tao* by Alex Anatole. In the first part, it will concentrate on the interpretation of Daoist concept of simplicity (*pu* 朴) in B.Hoff's book, pointing out to the problem of its simplification and elucidating the cluster of the meanings (or aspects) of *pu* in this book and in comparison with its understanding in Classical Daoism. In the second part, it will discuss the main points of interpretation of Daoism as a "reflective mirror" for illuminating the problems of Western (in this case, American) contemporary consumer culture, presented in Alex Anatole's book, with the particular attention on his ideal of "contentment" and "ideal day". It is claimed, that such popular versions of Daoism, although seemingly contradictory and superficial, and because of this rather mostly ignored by sinologists and investigators of Daoist practices, deserve more careful study by professional scholars, since they are the manifestations of the process of globalization of Daoism, which is inevitable in 21st century. Moreover, they are especially influential in forming a popular image of Daoist teaching, since the messages of such books spread to a far wider public, than the monographs by academic specialists in Chinese (Daoist) studies.

Keywords: Daoism, simplicity, fun, insipid, confusion, contentment, consumption

Introduction

For the recent two or three decades, enthusiasts of Daoism and comparative philosophers in the West have been keen to propagate this ancient Chinese philosophical-religious teaching as the resource of alternative ideas, helpful to solve the intellectual, spiritual and existential problems of contemporary Western civilization. Daoist ideas and practices are often promoted as a kind of panacea for the ecological crisis, personal psychosomatic disturbances, or the incongruities between spiritual and material life, which are, as it is often claimed, the outcomes of human's alienation from nature and one's true self¹. In other words, Daoism is treated as a preventive or curative means for overcoming the condition of disharmony on various levels and spheres. The realization of Daoist ideal of harmony or unity seems especially advantageous

for the living in the present world and situation, often characterized by the very opposite terms, such as “chaos”, “plurality”, “stress” and “conflict”².

The promoters of Daoist ideals and ideas of such kind are not as much sinologists or specialists in comparative philosophy, but rather enthusiasts or practitioners, who put their ideas into books intended for popular reading. Such kind of literature is rather ignored by most sinologists, since they view it as cases of intentional oversimplification of the classical teaching of Daoism for the ends of its popularity, in order to make it more readable and marketable, thus popular among wider public. However, in my opinion, such popular interpretations of Daoism, although seemingly contradictory and superficial, deserve a more careful study by sinologists, since they are the manifestations of the process of globalization of Daoism, which is inevitable in 21st century. Moreover, they are especially influential in forming a popular image of Daoist teaching. The messages of such books spread to a far wider public, than the monographs by professional scholars in Chinese (Daoist) studies³.

The aim of this paper is to discuss two popular interpretations of contemporary Daoism by two authors from the United States (both books in their Russian translations are also available in special Lithuanian book stores). The first one is a provocative and playful book *The Dao of Pooh* by Benjamin Hoff, which was published in 1982. It became a perennial bestseller for teaching Classical Daoism at American universities, used even by outstanding specialists in sinology. It would be not an exaggeration to say, that this “Poohish” version of Daoism certainly helped to make Daoism one of the most exciting fields of sinology studies at least in the United States. Many Western readers consider this book on Pooh as a basic spring-board for the studies of Daoism, an attractive and simple way to catch its ideas. However, some sinologists consider it as a kind of New age or “Pop-Daoism” (Girardot 2008, p.108), since a more careful reading helps to realize, that Pooh has very little in common with some original Daoist ideals of life and the true master (or ideal ruler) as described in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. The second book for the discussion is *The Truth of Tao*, written by Daoist practitioner, largely martial artist Alex Anatole (Anatole 2005). Currently a head priest and president of the Center of Traditional Taoist Studies in Weston, he is also presented as a founder of the first Daoist temple and seminary in Moscow (in 1966), and the founder of the first Daoist temple of Original Simplicity in USA (near Boston). Moreover, he calls himself the one, who “opens the true Dao toward the West” (*kaipi zhenli dao wang xi* 开辟真理道往西), and claims, that he is concerned with the preservation of the authenticity or purity of Classical Daoism.

In this paper, I will critically discuss their main ideas as well as the interpretations of particular classical Daoist concepts and ideals. I will compare them with my own understanding of those concepts in relation to the wider context of this teaching, as presented in *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, since those texts are frequently cited here as the reminders of their original meaning. In the first

part, I will concentrate on the interpretation of Daoist concept of simplicity (*pu* 朴) in B.Hoff's book, as an example of westernized interpretation (or misinterpretation) of Classical Daoism⁴, pointing out to the problem of its simplification. I will elucidate the cluster of the meanings (or aspects) of *pu* in this book, aiming to answer the question whether, and if yes, then in which ways the concept of simplicity is simplified in *The Dao of Pooh*, and how such interpretation provokes our critical reflection on the ways of acting and living in the present world and existential situation. In the second part, I will try to extract the main points in Alex Anatale's book of using Daoism as a "reflective mirror" of the problems of Western (in this case, American) contemporary consumer culture. I will try to clarify his interpretation of Daoist teaching as a remedy for the negative and dangerous consequences of consumer society, by concentrating my attention on his provocative and controversial concept of "contentment", presented here as an authentic ideal of Daoist life. I will try to answer the question of how far (or close) it is from the original Daoist (Zhuangzi'an) understanding of contentment.

The Dao of Pooh: the Dao of simplicity or the simplification of Dao?

The metaphor of "uncarved block" (*pu* 朴), which is usually conceptualized in the Western sinology by the term "simplicity", is one of the most important metaphors for the Daoist imagining of the ideal existential condition, as well as the society and the virtue of the sage. It functions in the cluster of Daoist ideas about naturalness ("self-so") and can be interpreted in ethical, aesthetical, social, ontological, ecological, epistemological and axiological senses. *Pu* was even considered by some Daoists (for example, Wang Bi) as a principle of true efficacy, the only way to complete success, or as a key word, embracing the essence of the teaching of *Laozi*. However, it seems to me that this metaphor was marginalized in scholarly (at least Western) discourse by other important and more extensively analyzed Daoist concepts, such as non-action (*wuwei* 无为), self-so (*ziran* 自然), blandness (*dan* 淡), authenticity (*zhen* 真), and nature (*xing* 性), although all of them have broad associations with *pu*. On the other hand, as prof. Livia Kohn have remarked in her book on Daoism and Chinese culture, the "practice of simplicity" as "a way to recovery" from "the complexity of social structures", "an overload of sensory experience", the pursuit of luxury goods, the power and higher positions, became "very popular in alternative circles of Western societies" (Kohn 2001, p.23).

B. Hoff aims to convince the reader, that this Daoist concept of simplicity could be illustrated by the concrete examples or behavior rather than explained in the intellectual – that is, "confusing" way. His book presents the Daoist principles of simple and natural living in the world in the character of "the

most effortless Bear we've ever seen" (Hoff 1983, p.69), pointing out, that even his name sounds similar to *pu* 朴 – "uncarved block", none the less than his appearance resembles the "formlessness of the form". He summarizes the main idea of the book as follows: it is a book "about how to stay happy and calm under all circumstances" (Hoff 1983, p. x). This stance is embodied in the image of Pooh, who is described as the creature, who "wanders around asking silly questions, making up songs, and going through all kinds of adventures, without ever accumulating any amount of intellectual knowledge or losing his simple-minded sort of happiness" (Hoff 1983, p. xii), being even unable to describe the Uncarved Block in words. Although he "hasn't much brain", he never comes to any harm, since he does "silly things and they turn out right" (Hoff 1983, p. 21), thus seemingly acting in the similar effortless or self-so and non-mindful way, as Daoists aim to act. For him the questions "what's for the breakfast today?" and "what's going to happen exciting today?" sound the same. He is forgetful, not able even to remember which of his two paws is right, and which is left. In short, he is a silly, thoughtless bear with wandering and open mind, which reminds us of our childhood. But it is this open-mindedness and thoughtlessness which makes him the most original and attractive character among his animal friends.

In sum, classical Daoist ideal of simplicity (*pu*) is embodied here in the portraiture of Pooh, first of all, as **the state of mind or simple-mindedness**. Pooh often feels confused by the questions of his friends, being unable to answer them in clear ("logical", "rational" or "adequate") way. Most of his answers are the sounds like "hm", "mm", "well", "oh", from which one can make a conclusion that he doesn't know anything, or doesn't have his own opinion, or maybe is reluctant to choose one answer among other possible answers. It seems, that Pooh doesn't have a brain (in contrast with the Rabbit, who has it, and because of this never understands anything), but has some kind of knowledge or wisdom, which helps him to find the most efficacious solutions in the most complicated situations. One of the most illustrious examples is the scene in a small sand-pit, in which three animals – Pooh, Rabbit and Pit, after having a rest, decided to leave home. However, it was impossible, since that small sand-pit was following them about every time they tried to leave it. It was Pooh who found an absolutely senseless solution to find the way home, simply suggesting to look for this pit instead of looking for home, because "then we might find something that we weren't looking for, which might be just what we were looking for, really" (Hoff 1983, p.13). In other words, he preferred the aiming at the purpose without having that purpose in one's mind, or acting spontaneously and adequately to the situation rather than in rational (or purposeful) manner, which makes one dependent on some external cause.

Such state of mind, which makes possible to have things work "odd as that may appear to others", reminds us the important Daoist concept of "non-

action” (*wuwei* 无为). It is explained here by Benjamin Hoff as acting in the “indefinable and practically invisible” way, as some kind of “a reflex action”, or the going by circumstances and listening to one’s own intuition (Hoff 1983, p. 85). However, may the suggestion of Pooh to try to go home by going to sand-pit be understood as analogous to the natural flow with the stream, which illustrates the ideal of Daoist spontaneity and no-knowledge? Hardly so. It rather reminds me of the unconventional and unpredictable knowledge, based on the principle of probability. Moreover, Pooh later have revealed the secret of his successful solution how to find the way home in such meaningless or unconventional way: he was simply listening to the subtle call of twenty pots of honey, waiting for him for hours in his cupboard. Thus, the mysteriousness (or unconventionality) of his insight seems to be immediately lost here, as the main motivating force or direction of his way home in this case is the desire, or more concretely, the possibility for the fulfillment of his desire. This is very opposite to the original Daoist understanding of uncarved block, associated with the state of desirelessness and stillness.

Second important aspect of the Daoist simplicity, as emphasized by Pooh’s behavior, is the **feeling at ease with the present moment** instead of running from it as the Rabbit does, or trying to save the time for the purposeful work as many people usually do in their everyday life. Pooh is the one, for whom “today” is the most favorite day. His enjoyment of the pure presence emphasizes the importance of the experience of authentic being or authenticity. As B. Hoff tries to convince us, *pu* is not the information about the life but dwelling into the life itself. It points to that which goes without saying. Thus, instead of talking on the impact of things to our mind and life, it is better to talk about those things as they are by themselves, or just to deal with things as they are. Moreover, the knowledge of the world from the world as it is, according to the author, helps us to avoid one-sided and distorted view of it, which could have a negative effect on one’s emotional state as well.

This idea is illustrated by the dialogue between Christopher Robin and Pooh. Once Christopher Robin asked Pooh, why he is not busy. He answered:

“Because it’s a nice day”, thus why to ruin it?

“But you could be doing something important” – Christopher said.

“I am”, said Pooh.

“Oh? Doing what?”

“Listening”- he said.

“Listening to what?”

“To the birds. And that squirrel over there”.

“What are they saying?”

“That it’s nice day”.

“Well, you could be spending your time getting educated by listening

to the radio, instead, (...), how else will you know what's going on in the world?"

Then Christopher has turned on the radio, and they both had to listen to the announcement about the collision of five airliners over downtown of Los Angeles, which sounded really non-optimistic. After hearing this, Pooh have asked Christopher: "What does **that** tell you about the world?" (Hoff 1983, p. 101-102).

By this dialogue, Benjamin Hoff implies the question: What and how much we need to know, in order not to be prevented by such knowledge from living the uncomplicated life and experiencing it in adequate way? Such question seems quite important for the present living in the world of informational superfluity, and especially of the overflow of negative information in daily news (at least in Lithuania). The final question of Pooh in this dialogue implies another question: what have happened with the people's minds, namely, their ability or willingness to be attracted by the negative rather than positive news about the world?

In order to answer those questions, however, I would like to raise one more question: What are the nature and the function of such uncomplicated wisdom of Pooh? B. Hoff tells us, that it is its easiness and usefulness, "the wisdom you can get at", which sounds like "what-is-there-to-eat" (Hoff 1983, p.18). According to him, such wisdom tells us the simple, childlike, and mysterious secret, namely, that "Life is fun" (Hoff 1983, p.20). This is one of the most important messages of this book. In other words, the book's (or Pooh's) suggestion is to try simply to enjoy life instead of taking it too seriously. Then, my question follows: Is such enjoyment of life just an affirmation of the world as it is without any questioning of its meaning? Yes, it is as much as Pooh prefers the living instead of thinking about life. However, is this only a suggestion to concentrate on life's positive side at the expense of the negative one, or rather the exemplification of *Zhuangzi's* position of the affirmation of life in all its oppositions, looking at it from the "pivot of the Dao" or the perspective of all-pervasiveness, which is exemplified in the behavior of so many *Zhuangzian* characters even in their confrontation with death? In other words, is the Dao of Pooh, as taking fun in one's life, comparable to that "unemotional affirmation" (Moller 2004, p. 95) or unconscious ease and joy, which stems from the pure, infant-mind state of non-attachment to the world and to one's self, and – which is more important – is characterized by the absence of desires? Is it akin to the state of emptiness or undifferentiatedness, which are essential to *pu* in Classical Daoism?

In my opinion, it hardly is, since the reader is told from the very beginning of the book, that one thing which Pooh likes to do the most is to eat honey. His passion for tasting such very sweet thing poorly reminds Laozi's suggestion to taste the tasteless or insipid (*dan* 淡), which is a part of the Dao and is

also often associated with the state of *pu* in *Daodejing* (Laozi). The credo of Hoff's book and Pooh's lifestyle of "life is fun" could be converted into the saying "Life is tasty", but not in the sense of its tastelessness or blandness, which is the condition of "desirelessness" (no-desires) in classical Daoism. Pooh evidently is not without desires or attachments (at least attachment to the particular taste). In this sense, his enjoyments hardly remind me of a real Daoist enjoyment of life as stemming from the non-attachment to any object, sense or force.

However, at the end of the book Pooh was directly asked by Christopher what he likes doing best in the world, and his reply was: the best thing for him is not to eat honey but to enjoy that moment before eating honey. The author calls that moment the "awareness", explaining it as follows: "It's when we become happy and realize it, if only for an instant. By enjoying the process, we can stretch that awareness out so that it is no longer only a moment, but covers the whole thing. Then we can have a lot of fun" (Hoff 1983, p. 112). In other words, it is the awareness of happiness, which stems from the enjoyment in the process of the attainment of a certain purpose. According to B. Hoff, we need to have some purposes, although they have to be valued not by themselves but as the possibilities to participate in the process of their achievement. And it is that process which brings to our life more happiness and wisdom.

Such turn of the preferences of Pooh from eating honey to the enjoyment of the moment before eating, and the following remarks by B. Hoff first of all remind me of Zhuangzi's playful attitude to life, if to understand the play as the performance of movement or the process of constant repetition (life-death, forward-backward, being-non-being), which is expressed in *Zhuangzi* by two keywords – "transformation" (*hua* 化, in a sense of transformation of one's self with the Way) and "wandering" (*you* 游, as an effortless and relaxing movement) (Crandell 2010, p. 104,113). Such engagement in the process of transformation and self-transformation, or wandering requires the loss of awareness of the engagement in this process, as well as the loss of goal or particular direction. However, Pooh still has a wish to fulfill some desires. Thus, from the Daoist (at least Zhuangzi's) point of view, Pooh's enjoyment of the moment before eating honey is nothing else than an involvement in some kind of desire or anticipation of the fulfillment of the desire, or attainment of the goal, which again seems to be quite contrary to the Daoist idea of non-intentionality or purposelessness, as exemplified in the concept of *you* and *wuwei*, as well as the metaphor of uncarved block.

On the other hand, B. Hoff's statement "Life is fun" could be also interpreted as "Life is happiness". Let me remind, that the happiness (of the fish, butterfly, of a king, and other creatures) is often mentioned in *Zhuangzi* as the particular or most preferable experience of life, indicated here by various terms.⁵ However, *Zhuangzi* treats happiness rather as happiness without conscious awareness

of that happiness, namely, as the celebration of natural condition, whereas the happiness of Pooh reminds me a kind of adventure, which involves the elements of curiosity, surprise, unpredictability, and amazement. The latter is well exemplified in the “existential” question of Pooh: “What’s going to happen **exciting** today?”, but such question again provokes some emotions. I would agree that such attitude is very close to the childish view, namely, the ability to maintain the freshness of the look, as if everything happens for the first time. But I hardly imagine those elements as being characteristic to the state of uncarved block, which is characterized as the state of “emotionlessness” as well.

In another chapter, we are told that once Pooh bought a lot of various shoes, which he really didn’t need. He bought simply because the salesman was so nice to him, giving him a card “For Mister Pooh” and making him feel very important. The only excuse he gave to Christopher Robin for this deed was that he saw “a lot of people buying things they didn’t really need” – even if they could be happy and important without doing that (Hoff 1983, p. 133). Pooh evidently fails to restrain himself on accumulating things and eating tasty foods, thus practicing the way of life contrary to the Daoist virtue of *pu*. However, he acknowledges his fail of being not able to resist the temptation of buying non-necessary things, which means that although he pretends to be the embodiment of *pu*, he still has the room to improve his simplicity.

Now, the time is to ask whether and in which ways Pooh embodies the Daoist virtue of *pu*, or the original unspoiled nature, free of desires, artificiality and “sharpness”, as it was understood in Classical Daoism and practiced by the searchers for Dao? Let me once more remind of the observation by prof. Livia Kohn, that Daoist simplicity is expressed practically in two forms: **first**, as keeping one’s life on the basic livelihood needs, thus practicing “a physical restraint” on material consumption and luxuries as well as sensual pleasures, and **second**, as the mental practice of tranquility and purification or clearing the mind from the worldly desires and sensory inputs (Kohn 2010, p. 23). I would like to add here a third and fourth forms or ways of *pu*, which were emphasized in *Laozi*: **third**, putting oneself in the rear (being “a valley to the world”) and cultivating the virtues of weakness, softness, detachment and humbleness in order as a way to the power of all-inclusiveness, and **fourth**, preserving one’s authenticity (*zhen*) or getting rid of decorative and demonstrative behavior and virtues⁶. I would conclude, that Pooh is rather the embodiment of third and fourth ways of *pu*, even if his position more often seems to be the elusive and indefinite (like the absence or negation of any position) instead of being the lower or humble one. However, he fails to exemplify the first two forms of *pu*, which are prescribed in *Laozi* to the ideal of sage and ruler (*shengren* 聖人).

Moreover, the book about Pooh fails to reveal maybe the most important

meaning of uncarved block, as the principle of ideal ruling and true efficacy, which was presented in *Laozi* and seems very important even (or especially) today. It is, as explained more extensively by Wang Bi, the “encouraging growth at the branch tips by enhancing the root”, [...] “observing where things come from, and following them to where they inevitably return”. It could be applied by the ruler in following ways: “do not try to govern what people do but encourage their inclination to do anything depraved. Do not try to forbid their desires but encourage their disinclination to desire anything. Plan for things while they are still in a premanifested state and act on them before they begin” (Lynn 1999, pp.37-38).

However, it is necessary to remind that the author considers his book to be about the wisdom *from the point of a Western Daoist*, aiming to “explain the principles of Daoism through Winnie-the-Pooh, and to explain Winnie-the-Pooh through the principles of Daoism” (Hoff 1983, p. xii). Then, what is the difference between Chinese and Western Daoist interpretation of *pu*, as it is presented in this book? I would conclude that it is many-sidedness of the former and one-sidedness of the latter. The root of their difference lies in the main models of thinking, namely, Daoist holistic one (thinking from the centre or axis of Dao) and Western dualistic one (thinking through oppositions). Accordingly, the main credo of Pooh is “to enjoy life in its positivism” and not to be serious about it, whereas for Daoist (especially Zhuangzi) it is “neither enjoy nor not enjoy”. Daoist prefers to accept as it is, because its positive side is as good as negative, or to say in other words, the life and the world should not be divided into the positive and negative sides. Moreover, Daoist carelessness cannot be separated from the seriousness, since the natural transformations is quite a serious process. There is nothing else except of it, although the boundary between easiness and seriousness is, as with all boundaries in Daoism, very thin and invisible. Pooh evidently lacks such seriousness, leading the author to the simplification, namely, the one-sided presentation of Daoist metaphor of *pu*.

The Truth of Dao: How to live an ideal day?

Alex Anatole calls his version of Daoism “an ideology of warriors”. According to him, *Laozi* is the book, which teaches us “how to act in the world of chaos, suffering and absurdity” (Anatole 2008, p. 117)⁷, or how to preserve the clear vision of the reality and the true self, one’s natural desires in the conditions of confusion, and how to attain the contentment. Those two words – the **confusion** and **contentment** – are the essential words, describing the beginning and the end of Daoist way of life in Anatole’s book.

Thus, the first question to examine is: How Anatole describes the source of the **confusion**? According to Alex Anatole, it is the society, or, more

concretely, the artificial values and ideals pressed on the people by social institutions and propagated by media and especially TV. Among those values, Anatole names love (specifically, universal love), patriotism, material success, one's attempt to be the first and the best among others, working diligently or even making one's job into the essence of one's personal identity, unrealistic expectations or too-optimistic belief in the limitlessness of one's possibilities and abilities. Those values are also related to everything, which comprises the fulfillment of so-called "American dream", that is, to have a big house, a good car, a few children, credit in the bank, and to postpone one's ideal time – the time, which is essentially one's personal, free time – for the retirement time somewhere in the future. According to him, all those artificial values prevent the realization of one's natural desires and needs, and give raise to the expectations, which usually are far from the reality. In other words, they obstruct the clear vision of reality as it is (Anatole 2008, pp. 28-29), thus making people unhappy and confused. They lead to self-deception, self-overestimation or self-belittling, since those who are not able to attain the consumerist ideals mentioned above, are usually considered by society (and by themselves) as "the losers".

What solution does Anatole offer for this situation? He suggests to resist those pressing values and to seek instead for the **contentment** – just because, according to him, the same idea was held in *Laozi*. Moreover, according to Anatole, the contentment of the adherents of any philosophical or religious system should be the main criterion for the evaluation of the effectiveness or success of those systems (Anatole 2008, p. 385). Thus, our next question is: how Anatole describes this Daoist contentment? For me, it seems very vague. In one page he just mentions, that it is "the physical and mental health, the spiritual clearness and tranquility, and some kind of material well-being" (Anatole 2008, p. 11). The most important thing for the contentment seems for him the ability to enjoy the present moment, to be here and now, to live today, which he compares with the principle of *chan* 禪, "the particular mental condition of the concentration on the present moment" in Chan-Buddhism as the path to spirituality and enlightenment (Anatole 2008, p.378). For Anatole, it also involves the ability to enjoy that which cannot be lost. Specifically, the everyday purpose of the seeker of Dao should be oriented towards the attempt to live an ideal day, which is interpreted by Anatole as an original Daoist goal. As he writes, "*Dao de jing* [...] is the practical manual for the living an ideal day. [...] Daoism presents the most practical and simple way for the realization of ideal day". Accordingly, the meaning of life in Laozi's teaching he describes by a short formula "to live every day as good as possible" (Anatole 2008, p.385, 424). Such an ideal day should be understood as "a model, according to which the person would like to live all further days in his life, if he would not need to work" (Anatole 2008, p. 380).

How does the ideal day look like? Everybody should model it according to one's wishes – what he likes to do, prefers and enjoys. Meanwhile, Anatole gives it a rough description: first, you can take your breakfast and shower in the morning, then go for a walk in the dog's company or to run over morning newspapers. In the midday, after the lunch, you can take some of your favorite pursuits, or some reading, or go to the beach. In the afternoon it would be nice to have a substantial lunch, after which you can take a walk near the sea coast. In the evening you can have a dinner and a drink with your friends (Anatole 2008, p. 381). The essential merit of such ideal day, according to him, is the possibility to avoid hard working, stress, and one's readiness to invest one's money into one's time. Because such ideal day could be arranged with very small expenses (for example, one can borrow books for the reading from the library, to live in the rented room instead of buying a house, to go by the bicycle instead of buying a car, and to breathe fresh air for free). According to Anatole, one's ability to live a lot of such days is the "highest attainment from Daoist point of view", although such person usually is considered by society (that is, in the eyes of the popular mentality) to be a loser (p. 383).

On the other hand, as Anatole points out, such Daoist way of life of "ideal days" can be attainable not by everybody, but only by certain exceptional persons. Because only few among many are strong enough and ready for fighting, are sensitive and insightful, or able to discern the illnesses of contemporary society. Whereas most of Western people are the victims of the cult of speed and fast spending: "the people are used to "fast food", high speed Internet, moment credits got in five minutes, losing flesh in five days, update news in 30 seconds, the retelling of literature classics in ten pages", the quick recovering of health with the help of certain "wondrous pill" or laser surgery" (Anatole 2008, p. 32). Contrary to this, the Daoist way of life and enlightenment could be attainable only through long-time and all-inclusive self-cultivation, which leaves no gaps or slight tears. As he says, "it is impossible to take from it (the system) only those parts, which don't disturb one's well-being or mental comfort" (Anatole 2008, p. 12). Thus he concludes, that the contemporary Western society is not ready to accept Dao, or Daoist vision of reality, - just because most people are dependent on the "tranquilizing mistakes" and are not able (or do not wish) to see reality as it is (Anatole 2008, p. 195).

This interpretation of Daoist way of life as a "reflective mirror" and the remedy for Western (American) ills of consumerism and materialism seems to me provocative, but at the same time very contradictory. In one place the author claims, that the Daoist way of life has nothing in common with the pursuit for the material well-being, but in another place he declares, that "Daoist should have a comfortable place for the living, suitable as much as possible for spending one's ideal days" (p. 406). Moreover, he even claims,

that “Daoism, in contrast to other religions, is far from denying the wealth. Money is the means for making a comfortable style of life, thus it plays a positive role”, which, according to him, is proved by the popularity of the Deity of the Wealth in Daoist temples (p. 411). Such reasoning prompts me to conclude, that the author does not make any difference between Classical Daoism (the books of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*) and its later development with the inclusion of many forms and cults of so-called “popular religion”, in which the cult of the God of Wealth is one among many others. Anatole tends to convince the reader, that Daoist way of life is quite in accordance with the spending of money for the daily well-being, but not in accordance with the accumulation of money and wealth for its own sake.

There are contradictions in the interpretations of other Daoist tasks as well. For example, in a few places Anatole declares that one of the main purposes in Daoist life, emphasized by Laozi and Zhuangzi, is the stillness, tranquility of one’s mind (p. 408-409). But still in another page he writes, that Daoist “model of the warrior-scholar” implies the inclusion of a passion in the Daoist way of life” (p. 413), that is, the passion or natural instinct of life, which, according to him, almost disappeared in the American society due to the prevalence of Protestant ethics of hard working. However, any passion, even the passion for life reinforces the attachment to one’s self, which seems to me contrary to Zhuangzi’s ideal of “no-self” (*wu wo* 无我), “no-mind” (*wu xin* 无心) and forgetting self (*wang wo* 忘我), as well as his view of life and death as natural change without beginning and end. Again, in one place Anatole recalls Daoist words, that everything we have in this world and our life (including ourselves), we have in debt (p. 400). Then, how could such understanding of one’s place and value in the world be compatible with the main Daoist aim “to live for one’s self”, as it is claimed by Anatole, and treated as “the healthy form of egocentrism” (p. 423)? As he writes, “Actually, you have only two possibilities – either to live for yourself, or for other people. There is no any go-between!” (p. 423).

Those words seem to me the clearest evidence of the main problem of his interpretation of Daoism, or the reason of the oversimplification of Classical Daoist teaching in this book. The problem lies in the dualistic view, or the treatment of Daoist holistic view (one of “the unity of the opposites”) from the dualistic point of view; namely, the separation of individual and society, material and spiritual life, the human and “Heavenly” spheres, and the praising of one side at the expense of another. Anatole fails to acknowledge the ‘two-sidedness’ of Dao, or to see its extraordinariness in its ordinariness, the unity in the particularity. Such simplification of Classical Daoist message, by emphasizing the interests and freedom of the individual and downplaying the interests of society, rather complicates this message and Daoist ideas. Since, as Zhuangzi said, “”This” is also “that”; “that” is also “this”. “This” implies a concept of right and wrong; “that” also implies the concept of right and

wrong. But is there really a “this” and a “that”? Or is there really no “this” and no “that”? Where “this” and “that” cease to be opposites, there lies the pivot of the Way. Only when the pivot is located in the center of the circle of things can we respond to their infinite transformations.” (Mair 1994, p. 15).

The sources of Anatole’s interpretation of Daoism could be found in the number of interpretations from mid-20th century, when *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* were viewed by many Western interpreters (such as R. Wilhelm, J. Needham, Feng Youlan, Lin Yutang) as a philosophy of life, suitable for the ordinary and everyday world, and especially as philosophy of inaction, “a doctrine of detachment and withdrawal rather than of moral commitment and engagement” (Clarke 2000, p. 90), advocating the retreat from social responsibilities and retirement into a leisured way of life somewhere in the countryside. Such vision of Daoism, as some scholars remark, fitted to the ideals of counter-culture movement and individualistic ethics, so popular in United States in 1960s. It was also in accord with the stereotypical separation of Confucianism (as the doctrine of social engagement) and Daoism (as the doctrine of social “non-engagement”), so popular among sinologists of that time (Clarke 2000, p. 91). But I would like to mention here one particular interpreter of Daoism – Lin Yutang, who was a writer, one of the early translators of Chinese Classical texts into English, the popularizer of Chinese philosophy and the way of life in the West. It is his partial translation of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, supplied with his own comments, used by Alex Anatole in his “The Truth of Dao”⁸. This can help to explain non-discriminative use of the quotations of *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* and Lin Yutang for the approval of his statements, ignoring not only the differences between the two Classical books of Daoism – *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, but also the variety of positions in *Zhuangzi*. This then helps to explain, why the famous credo of Yang Zhu “each one for himself” and his egoistic position is presented here as a Daoist one.

Finally, “The Truth of Dao” and its ideal scenario of ideal day (or days) seem to me as the extension or adoption to the present situation of one of Lin Yutang’s sentences: “If you can spend a perfectly useless afternoon in a perfectly useless manner, you have learned how to live”⁹. The same idea was presented more extensively in his very popular book *The importance of Living* (published in 1937) in the chapters “The Chinese Theory of Leisure” and “The Cult of the Idle Life”. Here Lin Yutang treated this special Chinese attitude and way of life as the opposite and alternative to American one: “The American is known as a great hustler, as the Chinese is known as a great loafer. And as all opposites admire each other, I suspect that the American hustler admires the Chinese loafer as much as the Chinese loafer admires the American hustler” (Lin Yutang 2000, p. 146). One of the causes of such Chinese love of leisure stems, according to Lin Yutang, from Daoist philosophy of life, and is bound up “with a life of inner calm, a sense of

carefree irresponsibility and an intense whole-hearted enjoyment of the life of nature”, “It must come from an inner richness of the soul in a man who loves the simple ways of life and who is somewhat impatient with the business of making money” (Lin Yutang 2000, p. 153). Lin Yutang saw a “philosophic contradiction between being busy and being wise. Those who are wise won’t be busy, and those who are too busy can’t be wise” (p. 148). However, he believed, that the development of technologies and “the machine culture” will not only improve material and physical conditions of life, but also will get the human’s more free, bringing “nearer to the age of leisure” (p. 147). Such vision, as could be seen from the book of Alex Anatole, was not fulfilled and even brought people into a tighter prison of consumerism. For this Anatole blames mainly the society and its propagation of wrong values, which again could be resisted with the help of Daoism.

In sum, Anatole’s interpretation of Classical Daoism offers some existential answers, but at the same time raises even more questions about the possibility of practical application of Daoist wisdom to the contemporary life of boundless consumption. One of the questions, which I am still not able to answer, is: how can it help to resist the indulgence in material consumption as a phenomenon of a massive culture, if such philosophy of life is “not for massive use”? It also raises the question of treatment of responsibility in Daoist ethics – the topic, which was already discussed by sinologists, but is rather ignored by Alex Anatole, since he, as it was mentioned above, treats Daoism as a version of “a healthy form of egocentrism” (Anatole 2008, p. 423)¹⁰. However, how could such treatment be compatible with the Daoist goal of simultaneous bringing of order to the individual and to the empire, as expressed in the formulas “order one’s person and govern the empire” (*zhishen zhiguo*), “the sage inside and the ruler outside” (*nei sheng wai wang*)? What sense is to improve oneself without improving society, if one still lives in that society? Moreover, how could one be sure, that spending such ideal day after day will not turn into easy vegetation? Finally, such suggestion to fulfill only one’s natural or minimal desires in the context of contemporary consumptive life still leaves one with the questions: “what is better?” and “what is worse?”, “what is enough?” and “what is too much? Is the wish to have a car too much, than to have a bicycle? Is working the worse thing than not working? Such questions should not disturb Daoist adept, who views the world from the perspective of unity or “neutrality”, or, let’s say, “contentment without contentment”, which results from having no any desires and intentions. On the other hand, such a way of life as described by Alex Anatole seems available only for those, who have already gained some amount of money and feel content with it. In other words, one should buy his ideal day (days) and the possibility to seek the contentment. But this is the fight with the consequences rather than reasons.

Conclusion

Putting aside the critics of the over-simplification and even vulgarization of classical Daoist ideals in the books by B. Hoff and A. Anatole, it is necessary to admit that they challenge in a provocative way our understanding of the present daily life in the age of consumerism. They provoke us at least to ask ourselves, whether the desire to have not too much is worse than not to have anything, or is it the same, if considered from the perspective of Daoist understanding of *pu* and for its realization? In my view, the desire to have not too much is what Pooh aims for, even if he sometimes fails. It tends to be more understandable and acceptable for the Western mind, as it seems to be universal and achievable by everyone, whereas not having (or not wishing to have) anything is more relevant to the original (Classical) Daoist meaning of *pu*. However, its realization involves a whole complex program of self-cultivation, attainable not by everyone.

On the other hand, Daoist ideal of simplicity of life and the avoidance of consumption, emphasized in both books, and especially in the second one, is shared by all religions, since they take the priority to the spiritual life over the material one. In this sense, Daoism works in concord with other religions. Moreover, Daoist position of non-conformity or non-acceptance of the common and artificial values, emphasized in Anatole's book, could be used as the curative means for minimizing human's wishes and repressing "owner's mentality" in various contexts, and could be interpreted as the contemporary transformation of the Confucian idea of "being vigilant with oneself" as well. However, quite more important and specific, and the most challenging for the contemporary Western mind and consumerist mentality is Classical Daoist position of oneness or emptiness of being, which grounds all the actions of Daoist adepts, and pitifully, seems to be missed in both books. This position is essentially "preventive" one, namely, the position of "no wish", "no desiring", "no self" or "happiness without happiness", challenging our (Western) popular and ordinary understanding of happiness, contentment or joy as the states of positive emotions. It seems to be hardly conceivable and applicable for the daily life and to the Western mind.

Finally, the inclusion of Daoism as a resource of alternative ideas or dialogue partner into the discourse on consumption should be provided in the perspective of global rather than Chinese-Western culture, simply because the problems of consumptive mentality and culture today are evident in China no less than in the West. Thus, it is quite reasonable today to ask: "How can Daoism be helpful for the contemporary Western society, if it is not helpful for the Chinese themselves?"

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Notes

- 1 For the one of the most comprehensive and critical discussions of the assimilation of Daoist texts, ideas and practices within a wide range of Western interests (religious,

philosophical, political, medical, environmental, ethical, etc.), see J.J. Clarke (Clarke J.J., 2000). On the spread and adaptation of Daoist Internal alchemy (neidan) in the West, or more exactly, United States, see Michael Winn's article with the valuable bibliographical list in the collection of articles on Daoist Internal Alchemy (Winn M., 2009). On the critical review of the commodification of Chinese medicine and proliferation of *Daodejing* in the so-called "American Daoism" and its body practice, see Elijah Siegler article (Siegler E., 2006). The author pays particular attention to the ways, in which Daoist practice was re-contextualized in North America, by construing classical Daoist texts (especially *Daodejing*) mainly as modern practices. However, as he remarks in the introduction, the contemporary Western (American) fascination with Daoist religious ideas and practices "derives not from China directly, so much as from Orientalist fantasies about China's past" (Siegler 2006, p.257).

- 2 However, among scholars and sinologists there are many skeptics, who doubt or criticize the possibility of using Daoist ideas for the solution of problems of various contemporary crisis or schisms, mentioned above. Such critical or skeptical opinions are expressed by many authors in the collection of articles on Daoism and ecology (Girardot N.J., etc., 2001). On the other hand, I would like to remind, that the highest state of Daoist achievement in self-cultivation was described by Daoists (starting with Zhuangzi) as the state of chaos (personalized in the ideal of Hun dun), which was, however, understood in quite different way than in mainstream Western thought. It was rather characterized in positive terms, as the equivalent with the ideal of unity, thus better called "the chaotic order" (Schipper K., 1993, p. 139-155). It seems to me, that it is exactly such particular Daoist understanding of the ultimate ideal and inner psychosomatic state, which makes the discussion of Daoism in opposition to "classical" Western thought, especially in the perspective of the "order via disorder", "harmony via disharmony", "unity via disunity" models even more problematic, than it may appear from the first sight.
- 3 One of the few outstanding specialists in Daoist religious practice, who at the same time is interested in the activities and personalities of the "practical popularizers" of Daoism in the West (mainly United States), is Louis Komjathy. He is a scholar of Daoism and the author of three books on Daoist religious practice, a specialist in Chinese religions and comparative religious studies, interested in the investigation of Daoist contemplative practices from a comparative perspective, "American Daoism", and at the same time he is a participant – observer in a variety of Quanzhen monasteries in China. See his article on the Qigong in America (Komjathy 2006). Of a great value is also his extensive list of Daoist teachers in North America, with the indication of their main biographies, activities and bibliographies, and the list of Daoist organizations in North America (Komjathy Louis. Daoist Organizations in North America). Available at: <http://freepdfdb.org/pdf/daoist-organizations-in-north-america-louis-komjathy-kang-siqi-7170454.html> [Accessed 15 July 2013]
- 4 By this term I mean Daoist teaching by *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*
- 5 As Victor H. Mair points out, the text of "Zhuangzi" is fond of such words as *bi* 比 ("[to be] content"), *yue* 悅 ("to delight in"), *huan* 歡 ("to enjoy"), *xiao* 笑 ("to laugh"), *xi*

喜(“to like”), *yu* 喻 (“to be pleased”), *le* 乐(“happy, joyfull”), *tian le* 天乐(“heavenly joy”), *ren le* 人乐 (“human joy”), *yin le* 淫乐 (“lascivious joy”). (Mair 2010, p. 91-92).

- 6 Laozi, ch. 28 and 19 accordingly.
- 7 I have used the Russian translation of this book (Anatole 2008).
- 8 This is: Lin Yutang 1948, *The Wisdom of Laotse*. Random
- 9 Available at: www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/48298.Lin_Yutang [Accessed 29 September 2013]
- 10 By this, he evidently repeats once very common, but nowadays out-dated Western stereotype of Daoism as the “philosophy of individualism” and “anti-sociality”, which cannot stay any critics. For him, Laozi was teaching “to enjoy the life by oneself and to leave the society to stray in its mistakes” (Anatole 2008, p.424), since “Daoism is not concerned with the transformation of society” (p.233).

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