



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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<i>Student Name:</i> Sun Yuang	
<i>Module Code:</i> SICH 4002	<i>Student number:</i> 1804386
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Comparison of Lao Zi's and Buddhas Utopia

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1. Introduction

Since the birth of human civilization, there is a very interesting phenomenon. Everyone has a way of life that he aspires to, which may be humble or elegant. These are the potential goals of people. As the ancient sages proclaimed their truth, studying the lifestyles they aspired to might be a good way to help us understand their teachings more deeply, since the lecturing activities of these sages life-long efforts were to some extent to hope to achieve this ideal country, Utopia. Not only because the research on the Utopia often involves different fields, such as politics, social structure, art, culture, etc., but also because the Utopia of Amitabha Buddha, the Western Pure Land, has a certain religious color, and can also be understood as having a certain The supernatural phenomenon, but this does not prevent us from studying the ultimate purpose of its ideal state, so I hope to try to analyze and compare the similarities and differences between Laozis and Buddhas thinking through different angles, such as peoples thinking about the country, peoples living conditions, peoples values.

2. People's living conditions

Observing the conditions of the people in the ideal life described by the saints is the first way to understand the different types of ideal states simply and quickly. First of all, in this regard, Lao Zi once gave a very clear statement. The original text Chapter LXXX translated by Xu Yuanchong is as follows:

A small state with few people may have hundreds of tools but will not use them. Its people value their life and death and will not remove far away. They may have boats and cars, but they have no need to ride. They may have armors and weapons, but they have no need to use

them. They may return to the age of recording by tying knots. In an ideal state people will find their food delicious, their clothes beautiful, their houses comfortable, and their life delightful. A neighboring state may be within sight, with cocks' crow and dogs' bark within hearing, but people will not visit each other till they die of old age.¹

In Lao Zi's concept, he believed that an ideal country should be composed of small countries and few people. In addition, there are several very important pieces of information in Lao Zi's description. First, the people at this time had extremely superior living conditions; second, people had convenient tools but did not use them; third, people hardly needed each other contact. Although these three key messages are very concise and clear, they contain a lot of connotations, and some of them seem to be somewhat different from the Buddha's conception of the Utopia.

First of all, by comparing Lao Zi's first point of view, in the Buddha's view, a perfect world should also have a prosperous life for everyone. At least in the *Infinite Life Sutra*, it was recorded that there is inexhaustible wealth in the Western Pure Land, and people living there will not worry about food and clothing at all. In terms of the basis of life, Amitabha and Lao Zi have almost the same views, but there seem to be some differences in other concepts.

According to the records of the *Infinite Life Sutra*, 'When I become a Buddha, those born in my Land will obtain food. Just as they wish for, these things would appear before them immediately. None of them would be unable to fulfill their wishes.'² There is a very small detail here that is worth noting. In the ideal country of the Buddha, people do not need too many tools because of the Buddha's vows, and their lives can be satisfied only by their ideas, which is completely different from the people in the ideal country in Lao Zi's ideas. People living in Lao Zi's Utopia choose not to use tools not because they can rely on external supernatural powers, but because they fundamentally cut off the corresponding worries and

¹ 許淵衝 [Xu Yuanchong], ed. 英漢對照老子道德經 [Chinese-English Edition The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human] (Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2003), p176.

² Nameless, 'Wuliangshou Jing Zhongyingwen Duizhao', *Baidu Wenku* (2009) <<https://wenku.baidu.com/view/0af70805d35abe23482fb4daa58da0116d171f04.html>> [accessed 29 July 2022].

desires from the heart. The extremely subtle differences in the spirit of the two human beings are the main reason for the huge difference in the structure and system planning of the ideal later period between Buddha and Lao Zi.

The third point is that in Lao Zi's ideal country, because people are completely self-sufficient and have no extra external desires to pursue, people there will not communicate with each other until they die. However, in the ideal world of the Buddha, people came to this world because of good wishes, keep the communication, and received the Buddha's perfect education all the time, so people achieved perfect wisdom and became a Buddha. Through this simple comparison, we can clearly understand that the two saints have fundamentally different structures and considerations for the Utopia.

3. People's Feelings About The Utopia System

On the other hand, after we understand the organizational structure of Utopia, by understanding how different people feel about their society and the upper class at that time, we can try to understand the influence of this country on the people and how it operates in the opposite direction.

First of all, Lao Zi has a clear understanding of our current society. He considered 'The people are difficult to rule, for the rulers give exacting orders, so the people are hard to rule.'³ From Laozi's point of view, if the ruler imposes too many or unnecessary political systems on the people and affects their normal and natural way of life, it will make it more and more difficult for the people to be governed. This is why Lao Zi advocates:

If I do nothing wrong, the people will go the right way; if I love peace, the people will not go to war; if I do not impoverish them, they will become rich; if I have no selfish desire, they

³ 許淵衝 [Xu Yuanchong], ed. 英漢對照老子道德經 [Chinese-English Edition The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human], p166.

will naturally be simple.⁴

Lao Zi believes only the way of governance that conforms to the most normal way of life of the common people is the best way. For the standard of this best method, Lao Zi also mentioned in his writings in chapter XVII. ‘What is the best rule? None knows there is a ruler. What is the second best? The ruler is loved and praised. What comes next? He is feared. Still next? He is disobeyed.’⁵ which translated by Xu Yuanchong. He believes that the best result of the ideal country's governance is that the people think that everything is normal. People do not feel anything special about everything.

However, as for people living in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, they had different real feelings than Lao Zi described. The ideal state that Amitabha Buddha once described has two very important prerequisites. Buddha said:

When I become a Buddha, the land will be free from all evils. When I become a Buddha, if all The Buddhas in the uncountable Buddhahands in the worlds in the ten directions do not praise my name, and talk about my merits and virtues and the goodness of my Buddhahand, I will not attain The Proper Enlightenment.⁶

This passage conveys two very important messages. One, people do not feel any evil here. Second, the people here will be very happy and admire the Buddha very much. The reason why the Buddhas view is different from that of Lao Zi is that we have already given a more reasonable answer in the research in the previous paragraph, and they are aimed at different groups of people. First of all, for Lao Zi, in his ideal country, all people have no desires, and it can be said that they are relatively simple people without communication with others; therefore, people have long been accustomed to this kind of quiet and stable life and take it all for granted,

⁴ 許淵衝 [Xu Yuanchong], ed. 英漢對照老子道德經 [Chinese-English Edition The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human], p126.

⁵ 許淵衝 [Xu Yuanchong], ed. 英漢對照老子道德經 [Chinese-English Edition The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human], p34.

⁶ Nameless, ‘Wuliangshou Jing Zhongyingwen Duizhao’, *Baidu Wenku* (2009) < <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/0af70805d35abe23482fb4daa58da0116d171f04.html> > [accessed 29 July 2022].

without too much praise or denial. But in the Buddhas Utopia, not everyone has achieved perfection. People who live in the Land of Ultimate Bliss still need to accept the teachings of the Buddha, so the Buddha will emphasize that people cannot feel any evil in this place. This world with almost perfect external conditions forms a strong contrast with the imperfect human heart and cognition, and naturally it will also generate endless praise for the Buddha. Therefore, under the two different utopian systems, the people living in the ideal state that Lao Zi and the Buddha believed to have completely different feelings and views about their system.

4. The Values of People Living in The Utopia

Because Lao Zi and Buddha set up a utopian civilization for different groups of people, we can gain a deeper understanding and analysis of the different thoughts of Buddha and Lao Zi by studying the thoughts and values of people who are influenced by different utopian civilization backgrounds.

In the view of Lao Zi, ‘The ancients who followed the divine law would not enlighten the public mind but simplify it.’⁷ He has made it very clear here that he wants the common people to become more and more simple and not more and more cunning and treacherous, so Lao Zi will preach a unique way to achieve this goal:

Not to value and employ men of superior ability is the way to keep the people from rivalry among themselves; not to prize articles which are difficult to procure is the way to keep them from becoming thieves; not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder.⁸

In Lao Zis view, when he deliberately promotes this unique value, it means that people do not have any attachment to external objects at all, and that people will no longer have any selfish thoughts from the bottom of their hearts. In this way, people’s values should belong to

⁷ 許淵衝 [Xu Yuanchong], ed. 英漢對照老子道德經 [Chinese-English Edition The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human], p144.

⁸ James Legge: *Tao Te Ching Or the Tao and its Characteristics* (The Floating Press,2008), p.12.

a concept that has no high or low value of good and evil. This is a kind of thinking without too much distinction and distractions, but it does not mean that the common people are stupid. In Lao Zi's view, such a person has a very noble morality, but he does not think that this kind of moral behavior has any superiority. Lao Zi also gave a good analogy. He believes that such people should be able to be closer to a simple state in thought or mentality, just like a baby. In fact, Lao Zi has always preached that he wants people to return to a state of simplicity. Lao Zi also mentioned countless times in his writings that people should be as simple and innocent as a baby. Therefore, according to this statement in his writings, it is inferred that the necessary condition to achieve the result of the Utopian civilization described by Lao Zi without any conflict and struggle is that people have reached the state of *pu* 樸.

Some of Lao Zi's views are similar to those of the Buddha. The Buddha also mentioned in his vision of the Utopia: 'If they were to arise in them the thought of greedy attachment to their bodies I will not attain The Proper Enlightenment.'⁹ In the utopia created by the Buddha, people there will not have too much desire and discrimination. The Buddha himself also described that in his kingdom there will be no competition, no quarrels and no division among people. This idea is very similar to that of Lao Zi. Then, The Buddha has a very important point, he describes that people in his country do not talk about worldly topics, all speech is intelligent, wise and rational, and all people do good deeds and have become Buddha as their ultimate target. In the world envisioned by the Buddha, when other human beings become Buddhas, they will take the initiative to help more people come to this world and become Buddhas. This forms a virtuous circle, and the kind people who come to the Land of Ultimate Bliss, became Buddhas, will lead more ordinary people to come here and lead them to become Buddhas.

In the Buddhas Paradise of Ultimate Bliss, people's moral realm is almost perfect, but there

⁹ Nameless, 'Wuliangshou Jing Zhongyingwen Duizhao', *Baidu Wenku* (2009) < <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/0af70805d35abe23482fb4daa58da0116d171f04.html> > [accessed 29 July 2022].

are still differences in their values or the degree of wisdom. People here have to slowly reach the state of perfection through constant teaching. But in Lao Zi's utopian civilization, people's realm has reached the most natural and simple state. This is the biggest difference in the values of people in two different worlds.

5. Conclusion

By comparing and studying the content mentioned by the two sages, because Lao Zi and Buddha have not exactly the same positioning and idea of the ideal country, there is no which side is more superior, they just give their respective ultimate idea.

First of all, Lao Zi believes that only those who are free from desires and wandering thoughts are one of the basic conditions for surviving in the ideal country. However, according to the Buddha, as long as you have good thoughts, pure mind and are sincere enough, you can enter the ideal country. Lao Zi's Utopia is a result, and he expresses the ideal way of life that people have achieved after returning to their basics. The Buddha's Utopia was created as a means of becoming a Buddha, similar to a hotbed. People there will be educated by the Buddha so that they can reach a state of perfection and become a Buddha. The ideals of these two sages are completely different concepts. Therefore, in Lao Zi's concept, the Utopia is a final way of presentation, which is based on the condition that everyone can achieve the uncarved state, like *pu 樸*. In the Buddha's view, the Utopia is a complete and larger system that can accept good and ordinary people, and can help and ultimately lead them to a state of consummation, which is a reasonable, complete, and perfect set of systems. In other words, the ideal state envisioned by the Buddha is both a tool to help people achieve perfection and perfection itself.

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