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Fantasy and Taoism in The Earthsea Cycle

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ABSTRACT

The Earthsea Cycle by Ursula K. Le Guin, regarded as one of the most successful Western fantasy novels worldwide, constructs for the readers a fantasy Earthsea world where the harmonious combination of Oriental philosophy and Western literature lays the pillar. Drawing upon the philosophy of Taoism and Tao Te Ching, and resorting to the analysis of the three most significant elements in the book, true name, this essay conducts a profound and comprehensive exploration of the Taoist wonders in The Earthsea Cycle. This essay illustrates the connections among true name, language creation view and Tao to reveal how true name reflects the nature of life and existence. At last, the essay concludes that The Earthsea Cycle is a literary work of Western fantasy entwined with Oriental Taoist philosophy. True name is the essence of existence in the Earthsea world, while magic originates from the need to develop while following the course of nature. All things in The Earthsea Cycle rely on nature and inaction, and grow within the circle of life.

Keywords:

Ursula K. Le Guin, The Earthsea Cycle, True Name, Taoism

1. Introduction

Ursula K. Le Guin, claimed as “America’s greatest living science fiction writer” by [Streitfeld \(2016\)](#) in The New York Times, has lived a life heavily or even decisively influenced by and characterized with Taoist ideas and philosophies, both in the daily trivialities and the literary spectrum. In the interview by Producer Dmae Roberts for the second time, Le Guin said, “Taoism and Anarchism fit together in some very interesting ways and I’ve been a Taoist ever since I learned what it was” ([Roberts, 2010](#)). In the interview with Brenda Peterson, Le Guin did not hesitate to show her deep interest in Taoism by remarking that “This is something women need, I think, and long for, often without knowing it. That’s undoubtedly one reason why all my life I’ve found the Tao de Ching so refreshing and empowering” ([Peterson, 2016](#)). Such open and direct statements of her interest in and love of Taoism and all that it stands for demonstrate how Taoism plays an indispensable role in shaping Le Guin as a writer and an individual.

The Earthsea Cycle written by Ursula K. Le Guin is two trilogies of fantasy stories illustrated in six different books respectively with drastically different backgrounds, exotic landscapes, and various protagonists. The first three books are generally referred to as the first trilogy, while the later three the second trilogy. With Le Guin’s vivid

depiction, the Earthsea world in all six books can be tasted and digested while the reader experiences the unique history, ethnicity, custom, language, geographical features, and even functioning laws in a fantasy and magical land.

Beside her own statements in the interviews, Le Guin's family and childhood also insert paramount significance in adding Taoist elements to her future works including *The Earthsea Cycle*. Studies in anthropology, a family tradition Le Guin inherits from her parents, have decisively affected the writing career of her in various aspects such as enriching her writing with rich details of various ethnic customs, guiding her with both western and eastern philosophies, and inspiring her lifelong interest in Chinese Taoist philosophy that led her to spend decades dedicatedly specializing in the thoughts of Laozi. She constructs the blueprint of the world in *The Earthsea Cycle* in accordance with the core concepts emphasized by Taoist philosophy. Throughout the fiction, her deep understanding of Taoist philosophy, her philosophical exploration of self and the value of life, and her global view of the relationship between men and nature are well displayed in the work.

When it comes to the plots and developments in *The Earthsea Cycle*, the very first book, *A Wizard of Earthsea* opens the door to fantasy and magic by showing how Ged, a young boy, grows into a mature wizard by embracing his true nature and self. The second book, *The Tombs of Atuan*, on the other hand, lays another stone on the construction of Earthsea world by telling a story of light and dark, where the female protagonist Tenar finds the way out of the dark and unspeakable underground sacrificing rites with the influences and assistance of Ged. The third book, *The Farthest Shore*, illustrates the apocalypse mimicking the real world when equilibrium among all things is disturbed and eventually disrupted by a single man's desire, driven by the thirst for wealth and money, which, at the end, is quenched by Arren who receives help from Ged and manages to reset chaos to the original status at the boundary of the alive and the dead, the farthest shore.

In terms of the status of the work in literature, *The Earthsea Cycle* has long been considered as one of the three major Western literary works in the genre of Fantasy, with the other two being *The Lord of The Rings Trilogy*, by J. R. R. Tolkien, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C.S. Lewis. As for the reasons that differentiate *The Earthsea Cycle* from the other successful works of Fantasy, its depictions of the common Fantasy elements in an uncommon way inspired by Taoism play an indispensable role. In both *Lord of the Rings Trilogy* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the dichotomy of Good and Evil serves as a prevailing theme throughout the whole story. The clash of the good and the evil, the divergence of the light and the dark make up the backbone of the stories which witness how the heroes like Frodo and the lion, in the unremitting search for the absolute good, ultimately achieve the perpetuity and infinitude, as Jesus did. However, in all the stories of *The Earthsea Cycle*, the eastern Taoist thinking sparkles and twinkles. In *The Earthsea Cycle*, Le Guin does not utterly downplay the importance and justification of the dichotomy of Good and Evil. Never has she blindly trailed along the path. In contrast, Le Guin makes full use of the dialectical thinking in Taoism, proves the negative with the assistance of the positive, and holds the firm belief that light and darkness, good and evil, life and death are all mutually interdependent. There is no need or possibility to ever repudiate the existence of evil and death, or to pursue the unadulterated good and uncorrupted immortality. The reason lies in that though named differently, the opposite elements and forces are actually two sides assuring the wholeness and completeness in one thing. Le Guin's own magic guides the Oriental Taoism to function in concord with the Western fantasy narratives. Philosophy and literature collaborate in harmony and spark innovative thoughts in the realm of fantasy. Taoism and Western fantasy literature have both reached a new peak.

As for the significance and contribution of this essay, the previous academic research dedicated to *The Earthsea Cycle* was based on diversified perspectives and conveys profound messages, such as the growth of the protagonists, the power of language, the role of the female, and the Transcendentalist interpretation of the text. However, despite the fact that numerous interviews and her literary works witness Le Guin's public emphases on Taoism's paramount influence on her personal life and literary career, few scholars have taken the initiative to explore the Taoist connotations of the typical elements and significant symbols, such as true name, in *The Earthsea Cycle*. Regarded from the practical and social aspect, this essay encourages more cultural exchange and academic innovation by establishing a strong and solid connection between the western fantasy literary works and the oriental philosophical schools, which offers an excellent platform in reality to further people's understanding of the transcultural elements.

From the perspective of its research structure, this essay elaborates on the nature of life in Taoism indicated by the employment of true name in *The Earthsea Cycle*. In terms of its framework, this essay first draws upon the element, true name in *The Earthsea Cycle*, and the Taoist concept of the connection between name and creator to analyze how true name lays the unyielding foundation in both of them. Moreover, in reference to Heidegger's theory of language, this essay applies language as the essential thinking element, and is based on the relationship between creation view and language in order to discuss the element, true name, in the Earthsea world in the Taoist contextual situation. Furthermore, this essay resorts to the original essence, nature and status of language to reconsider the relationship. As a result, the essay draws a conclusion on how the depictions of true name in *The*

2. True Name as the Essence of Tao and the Creation of the Earthsea World

True name appears constantly and is one of the most important and repeatedly appearing elements in The Earthsea Cycle. More specifically, true name, as the core of Old Speech, also known as Tongue of Making, is, in fact, the origin and source of all the everyday-life languages used by people living in islands of the Earthsea world Old Speech (Le Guin, 1968: pp. 46-47), which should be referred to in the abstract sense, interestingly controls the natural power with materialized manifestations, due to the fact that true name is the exact representation of all things' fundamental attribution. In other words, understanding Old Speech enables people to catch a glimpse at the essence of existence. As a result, as a repetitive element in The Earthsea Cycle, true name lays the pillar for the whole fantasy world.

As the language spoken by the dragon species, true name is of vital importance in deciding the wizards' power and position. For instance, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, simply a quick glimpse of the word "Shadow" carved in the front of Ged's boat does not leave Ogion without overshadowing his face with frowning and scowling. The name of Ged's boat eventually proves to be the prediction of his destiny that he must hunt the nameless shadow to the borders and boundaries of the world. Ged's second boat carries the name of Farsighted, an exact depiction of its owner's intelligence and overreaching vision, and at the same time, enables Ged to pursue the sea beyond the sea and trace the land beyond the land. As a result, it can be safely concluded that the names of the boats represent their distinguished essences and unique nature. Other things are no exceptions, though. In consequence, the essential task of the magic apprentices in the Earthsea islands is to acquire the true name in all forms of existence.

True name visualizes and materializes the abstract nature of existence in both The Earthsea Cycle and Taoism. Specifically, Le Guin translated and interpreted the "common name", the literal translation of its Chinese equivalence in the first chapter of *Tao Te Ching*, as "the real name" (Le Guin, 1998: p. 3); while "Chang" is another word of paramount importance in Taoism, and carries the connotation of eternity and infinity. That people use the name to indicate the object and the name comes around with the existence of objects can be discovered with little effort as a universal phenomenon among all existences. Laozi, however, added the modifier "real" before the expression "name", and thus discussed the concepts in the metaphorical sense. Thus, true name, or real name as translated by Le Guin, is the manifestation or visualization of the abstract concepts and notions illustrating the nature all things are born or created with.

Laozi and Le Guin regard names as a priority before many other concepts in that names construct the bridge and forge the bond between men's cognition and their external existence. More specifically, according to *Tao Te Ching*, "The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; The Named is the Mother of All Things"¹. The original state of the universe happens to be an unnamed or nameless one, meaning that all things cannot be addressed directly with their present names. The universe at the beginning of time, thus, finds itself in disorder and chaos. Name, which is constantly and dynamically changing, becomes the origin of all existence by reflecting the essential attribution of everything. Naming, the process that forges the most effective and efficient bond between people and the external world, shows people with a relatively profound and comprehensive understanding of being, and in consequence, transform the primitive chaotic status into a meaningful civilization of regulations, legislations, and organizations. Therefore, it is through the naming process and names that human beings start to reach out for the universe and to comprehend the being.

The Tao in Taoism is tantamount to true name in The Earthsea Cycle. With the constantly changing names and the stable static essence of things, the creation and development of the universe stems from the starting point of one end in the circle while rolling constantly to create a harmonious return "from the Mysteries into the deeper Mystery" (35). Likewise, in The Earthsea Cycle, Segoy, equipped with little more than language, creates the Earthsea world and systematically constructs the civilized society. The name forwarded by Segoy in The Earthsea Cycle is fundamentally the equivalent to the Tao. The reason lies in that without language, word, or name, there would not have been life, existence, or the light bursting from things. Hence, in this sense, there is no fundamental difference between true name in The Earthsea Cycle and the Tao in Taoism.

The incredible power of names and naming is not a foreign concept in a lot of cultures, religious beliefs and philosophical schools. "Theoretical, practical and aesthetic consciousness, the world of language and of morality—the basic forms of the community and the state—they are all originally tied up with mythico-religious conceptions" (Cassirer, 1946: p. 44). To be more specific, naming, the process reflecting men's endeavor to explore the external existence, as well as names, the representation of the internal attribution of existence itself, are both heavily demonstrated in The Earthsea Cycle, and can both trace their sources back to Taoist thinking, Christian belief on creationism, and Adam naming view. It is God that creates the world, separates heaven from earth, and light from darkness by making corresponding demands and orders orally. Later, with God's mercy and permission

Adam names things so that the internal characteristics of things could find their external manifestations in a direct and unambiguous manner. Hence, the original state of being as a disordered chaos is gradually transformed into a well-organized civilization with the power of naming and names.

Le Guin's adoption of poetic expressions in The Earthsea Cycle helps the readers to better approach the meaning of true name. The utilization of poetic expressions in Tao Te Ching, Le Guin's translation of the book, and The Earthsea Cycle all contribute to elaborating on the nature of true name and existence without causing misunderstandings or ambiguities. To be more exact, Laotse, who is concerned that the following generations might be misguided with the common names in real life and misinterpret the book, resorts to the poetic language to illustrate and depict Tao in a way people seldom employ in daily life. Consequently, the embedded wonder of Tao can be explained in a real and everlasting language. Coincidentally, with the purpose that using expressions foreign to people's daily life might help reveal the secret how true name reflects the existence of things and the nature of life, Le Guin also adopts the poetic form as the medium to translate Tao Te Ching. Moreover, the language readers might detect in all books of The Earthsea Cycle, without exceptions, are characterized with poetic phrases. From the above analysis, it can be safely deduced that both Laotse and Le Guin adopt the use of poetic language aiming at directly discussing the nature and existence of life.

Not only does Le Guin construct the Earthsea world with poetic words and expressions, but also she directly adds true name as one of the most significant elements in the magical spectrum to engage truth and nature of all things in The Earthsea Cycle. One example is that in the first book of The Earthsea Cycle, when the ancestors of all men raise the islands from the bottomless depth of the sea, the unique true name is safely and soundly preserved in all things. The Old Speech whose every single letter and word represent nothing but truth is closely connected with the real nature of all things. For instance, "every single drop of water in the ocean has its name in the Old Speech" and "there is no end to that language" (Le Guin, 1968: pp. 46-47). As a result, true name, as the representative of the nature of all existences, consists of magic and endows men with true power.

The view regarding true name in The Earthsea Cycle coincides with the related Taoist thoughts, however, the ones about the nameless things and the unnamed state diverge from each other. According to Taoism, the nameless state of the universe that traces back to its origin is Tao itself. Because of its characteristics being eternally unchanging and surreal simultaneously, the Tao, in this sense, is existence. More specifically, in terms of existence, on the one hand, Existentialists hold the belief that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1977: p. 27), indicating that freedom is rooted deeply in human beings, and so does it in their choices, the ultimate one of which lies in the way of life. On the other hand, Existentialists also believe that "hell is other people" (Woodward, 2016), meaning as freely as everyone is endowed with the right to choose their ideal way of life, at the end of day, one's freedom to choose will inevitably interfere with the others'.

Le Guin in The Earthsea Cycle, on the contrary, approaches the concept revealing the essence of the nameless and unnamed in the philosophical field from other perspectives. For instance, to begin with, in The Tombs of Atuan, Le Guin directly refers to The Nameless Ones worshiped by people through complicated rituals and sacrifices as one of the black arts, because it carries the metaphoric meaning of evil and dark in general. Moreover, from time to time, the names of things might also suffer from the fate of being eradicated by the unsympathetic hands of time. Even the Master of names does not shun from his own lack of a truly comprehensive acquirement of all names of all things, because "every single drop of water in the ocean has its name in the Old Speech" and "there is no end to that language" (Le Guin, 1968: pp. 46-47). Furthermore, that things with names can be found remains an undeniable fact. These things, interestingly and ironically, are given a generalized signifier as Nameless Ones, which carry the indication that no identity, no true self, and no soul can be found in them. Due to the absence of true names, the so-called Nameless Ones, instead, are equipped with nothing but engulfing darkness, indulged insanity, and the uncontrollable urge to destroy, such as the nameless shadow let out by Ged in A Wizard of Earthsea. Therefore, superficially, the concrete manifestations of the unnamed and nameless in The Earthsea Cycle take a different form. Fundamentally, they are in accordance with the Taoist counterpart with indications of a state in dark and disorder.

Apart from true name being the essence in both Taoism and The Earthsea Cycle, the ultimate question that must be addressed draws the readers' attention to reasons why it is particularly the acquirement of true names that endows men with the magical power. In The Earthsea Cycle, magic can not only create illusions or transformations to make a person "see and hear and feel that the thing is changed" (Le Guin, 1968: pp. 43-44), but also summon "real powers, drawn from the immense fathomless energies of the universe" (Le Guin, 1968: pp. 53-54). Le Guin adopts Laotse's thoughts and views in her construction of the Earthsea world with true name, the real nature of all things, being the basis and pillar in it. Similarly, the essential attribution of all things is displayed in Tao. "By action without deeds, may all live in peace" (73). The ideas Le Guin ultimately wants to express with her Taoist interpretation of true name as the essence of magic and power can be summed up in two parts. To obtain the true name of a thing requires a thorough interpretation of its real nature, while to address a thing with its true name is to act in accordance with its real nature, with Tao, and with the natural rules of the universe. In reality

when a person learns to act in accordance with nature instead of his or her individual interests, the person might have little chance to acquire magic, however, such actions will undoubtedly bring him or her something as powerful as magic, or even more powerful than magic.

Based on the above analysis, it is explained that true name is the essence of Taoism and The Earthsea Cycle. On the one hand, in The Earthsea Cycle, the function of the world, the empowerment of magic, and the destructive power of evil all originate from the acquirement of true names. "At the beginning of time, all things bore their own true names" (Le Guin, 1970: p. 107). Without true name in the Earthsea world, people would have had no effective and efficient means to explore both their inner selves and the external existence. On the other hand, in Taoism, names are the original of a civilized world with regulations and order. "The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; The Named is the Mother of All Things" (33). It is the appearance of language and the use of names that cultivates the world into the one we see, experience, and live in at the present. Therefore, true name lays the foundation for both the Taoist ideas and creation of the world in The Earthsea Cycle.

3. True Name as the Basis for People to Explore Creation both Inwardly and Outwardly

The Earthsea world is a miniature of the real one with true name playing an indispensable role in people's everyday life. The power of wizardry is decided by his knowledge of names, which means knowing the true name of a thing, be it a person, an animal or a plant, will undoubtedly endow the person with power over it (Comoletti, 2001: p. 113). All things with the true name must be summoned, controlled and used once the name is learned and spoken out loud. Thus, the acquirement of true names in the Earthsea world helps the protagonists to become empowered and more confidently explore the outside world. Meanwhile, the process of naming and learning the true names also motivates the people to listen to the most trivial yet real sound resonating in their heart, thus having a fruitful conversation with their inner self and soul.

- The naming process in The Earthsea Cycle symbolizes the period of time in one's life to overcome adolescence and grow into manhood. To be more specific, Le Guin actually takes a microcosmic view to regard and demonstrate Laozi's universe creation view as a more concrete manifestation in the individuals, so that the readers can more effectively and efficiently witness the process of a person being recreated from the carrier. For example, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the protagonist Ged is actually born with the name publicly known by the rest of the neighborhood as Dunny. He is, however, later nicknamed as Sparrowhawk by the others due to his characteristics being an active, agile and adventurous kid. Later, when he loses all his intelligence, consciousness and judgment as a result of the vicious battle between Gontish and Kargish, Re Albi, the great mage of all times, manages to cure him by giving him a new name, Ged, which also carries the metaphorical meaning of his growth and maturity. In consequence, the naming process is beginning of growth, maturity, and all that follows.

- The change of names and the absence or ignorance of true name in The Earthsea Cycle are associated with various meanings, which are sometimes positive and other times negative. The protagonists' stories in the Earthsea world shed light on the fact that the ignorance of true names is absolutely not something glorious or honorable, just like how little Dunny felt when the Kargish evades the village: "It rankled at his heart that he should die, spitted on a Kargish lance, while still a boy; that he should go into the dark land without ever having known his own name, his true name as a man" (19). In contrast, it is the change of names in The Earthsea Cycle that signals that of a person from both the physical and mental aspect. Sometimes, the changes are positive, signifying development and cultivation; other times, the changes might be negative, indicating deterioration or even destruction. Thus, true name should not be regarded as something that is unilaterally good or definitely bad.

- True name is the reflection of the real essence of existence, the real nature of life, and the real self of people. In the universe, few but true name can be found as something eternal, being the only infinite and everlasting absolute that never fades away with the passage of time. For example, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the process of naming by Ogion to Ged is heavily depicted with elements carrying symbolic meanings and metaphoric connotations. To be more specific, during the process of giving the true name to a person, the first step is to take the common names away from the person. The cloudy sky and the sparkling spring, which set the background for the naming process, are the symbols of the original chaotic and surreal state at the beginning of time when the universe and all things in it are still nameless. Secondly, the person involved in the process will be asked to walk across the icy mountain spring after taking off all clothes, which serve as a symbol for baptism, innocence and purity, and emphasis on the true nature of life. Consequently, giving a person or a thing the true name is to reveal the true nature of the existence.

- While true name establishes identity and represents the true self, if it is taken away, unimaginable consequences including the loss of an individual's identity and the external chaotic state will be caused and must be endured. More specifically, in *Tombs of Atuan*, Tenar, a little girl who is considered as the reincarnation of the Priestess to serve and worship the unnamed power, finds her name being taken away at the ceremony of

Sacrifice. The deprivation of her name forcefully pushes her to sacrifice the rest of her life serving the Dark Power and worshipping the unnamed unknown deity, because living namelessly means living without a person's true self which includes a person's values, ethics, and the pursuit of happiness. "The little girl, who had no name anymore but Arha, the Eaten One, lay on her back looking steadily at the dark" (181). Another example can be found in *Therru*, it is her constant questioning of her true name and the subsequent true self that leads *Therru* to recognize and embrace her real identity at last. As a dragon and a dragon lord, when *Kalessin* lands, *Therru* "and the dragon look at each other, eye to eye and they know who they are. They recognize each other" (Le Guin, 1990: p. 22). Thus, without the true name, a person loses the identity independence, and individuality, which is also the true self.

- As the reflection of true nature of life, the acquirement of one's true name also predicts a new phase of adventures and experience in one's life. In *The Earthsea Cycle*, all the protagonists set out for a heroic adventure in the outside world, and step upon the road to explore their inner self after gaining the true name. On the one hand, when it comes to exploring the outside world, the depictions in *The Earthsea Cycle* are in accordance with Taoist views. More specifically, Taoism believes that "in the beginning of time, there was a time when ever nothing did not exist, and then something came into existence which had no name" (203), which means the naming process starts a new phase of all things, and injects the element of change into them. Accordingly, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, on the day of *Ged*'s ceremony of adulthood, the great mage *Ogion* reveals his true name to him, which, subsequently, becomes his main inspiration to obtaining magic, exploring the unknown, and pursuing adventures. *Ged* devotes the rest of his life to discovering the secret of magic and becoming empowered through the process. In his latter life, his adventures inspired by the attainment of his true name take him to various places, from the suffocating desert with completely unfamiliar survival conditions to the land of the dead in the exotic territories. Therefore, attaining one's true name means reaching out for the world for opportunities of future growth and further maturity.

- On the other hand, gaining one's true name also encourages the person to explore inwardly by listening to his or her inner thoughts and understanding his or her inner self. For instance, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *Ged* lets out the nameless shadow because of his arrogance and ignorance at a young age. It also becomes *Ged*'s voluntary responsibility and obligation to hunt the nameless dark shadow to the borders of the world. Eventually, *Ged* breaks the seemingly eternal silence by orally addressing the nameless shadow with its true name; meanwhile, the shadow, without lips or the tongue, murmurs the same name: *Ged*. The two voices become one, just like *Ged* and the dark shadow become one, and achieve wholeness and completeness (Le Guin 252). There is no victory or failure in this hunt, just like neither can *Ged* be honored as a conqueror, nor should he be discriminated against as a loser. What he does is addressing the dark shadow with his own name so that he can become a whole person who truly understands his inner self, and thus, can never be used or taken by any other force or power. As a result, true name empowers the protagonists in *The Earthsea Cycle* to venture into both the external world and the internal state.

- The reason why the adventures that are inspired by acquirements of true names in *The Earthsea Cycle* are bi-directional is rooted deeply in the influence of Taoism on Le Guin. More specifically, Le Guin, an experienced expert having done much research on *Tao Te Ching*, translated the first sentence in the first chapter of the book into "the way you can go isn't the real way" (Le Guin, Way 3). The way one can go to explore the outside world is only the path between two points, the starting position and the finishing line. As a result, such ways individuals take to explore outwardly happen in the dimension of space. The real way, however, is not a visible and outward manifestation with concrete details in reality. On the contrary, it is the way leading inwardly, which means it is the one individuals take with the purpose of exploring the inner self in the spiritual homeland. Accordingly, the protagonists' adventures in the *Earthsea* world after gaining their true names are in accordance with the characteristic of the way in Taoism.

- The analyses of quotations from Taoism and examples from *The Earthsea Cycle* illustrate that the adventures for the protagonists to discover and explore their real inner self in the spiritual homeland is depicted through the elaborations on their adventures in reality and the outside world. As emphasized by Taoist philosophies, the harmonious combination of both the inward and outward adventures not only indicate the union and wholeness of an individual physically and mentally, but also completes a circle by returning to one's heart and soul. Moreover, the emergence and discovery of true name further the representation and emblem of its meaning. On the one hand, obtaining true names can empower the protagonists to step on their adventures outwardly, since knowing a thing's true name by heart endows the person with the power over it. On the other hand, the ultimate goal of acquirements of true name is to motivate the protagonists to make discoveries inwardly, since true name represents the revelation of true nature. Therefore, in *The Earthsea Cycle*, Le Guin guides the readers, with the empowerment of true name, to go on a journey refining their soul and rediscovering their true self.

4. True Name as a Soundless Song with Silence in both Taoism and the

Although true name does play an indispensable role in The Earthsea Cycle by laying the foundation for the function of the society and the empowerment of magic apprentices, the employment of true name does not require any complicated spell casting process, sophisticated rituals beforehand, or complex assistance of magical accessories such as the wand. On the contrary, in The Earthsea Cycle true name sings a soundless song with silence. To break through the traditional fantasy setting, Le Guin discards the popular fantasy elements with audacity. In a philosophical and poetic tone, the Earthsea world is constructed with clear spirits and a silent song.

In The Earthsea Cycle, the acquirement of true name and the subsequent empowerment both require silence and tranquility, which play the role as a premise and catalyst for men to listen to, hear and comprehend the voice from a higher yet real source. For example, in A Wizard of Earthsea, as a magic apprentice instructed by his supervisor Ogion, Ged's eyes are opened to glance at the essence of magic, which has little to do with the commonly acknowledged dazzling performances of skills and rituals or perplexing recipes of exotic herb names. In contrast the supremacy and divine-like power of magic paradoxically lies in its simplicity to listen to and learn true name which can "confer identity and help to distinguish one from one's human and nonhuman and environment" (Selinger, 1988: p. 26). Listening to true name and all things the linguistic collaborations represent is to listen to the song of silence, to approach truth through the superficial confusing illusions, and to eventually obtain the true power. Moreover, in Tehanu, Therru's awakening does not happen until she listen to the song sung by her hear with two names, "one of rebirth and one of simultaneous separation and symbiosis" (Selinger 29) in the forest of silence and tranquility. Hence, in The Earthsea Cycle, the soundless song in the environment contributes to the cultivation of the protagonists' inner peace and tranquility as well as the eventual physical empowerment and spiritual enlightenment.

According to Taoism, the function, manifestation and influence of Tao itself is also a silent one. Similar to Old Power in the Earthsea world, Tao plays the role of a passive supervisor and regulator to keep the function and operation of life, nature, and the world in harmony and balance. More specifically, "the Tao that can be told of is not the absolute Tao; The Names that can be given are not absolute Names" (33). Despite the constant attempts and efforts to explain and illustrate Tao with words and languages, the perfectness of Tao, as the essence of all things of all forms in the universe, hardly finds any exact definition or accurate interpretation by the linguistic approaches. The reason lies in that people who listen to Tao might hear no sound, and those who glance at Tao might see no form. Thus, Tao can only be described with words such Yi, Xi, Wei, which are used to depict divine and are themselves without specified meaning. As a result, both true name and Tao sing a soundless song, since they either represent or are the essence of all things themselves.

The soundless song in both The Earthsea Cycle and Taoism comes from a divine and heavenly power, and goes to the individuals' inner self. Specifically, the song is a quiet one in both The Earthsea Cycle and Taoism because, "the great tone is barely heard" (Le Guin, Way 56), and "there is great beauty in the silent universe" (101). According to Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher who is deeply influenced by Taoist philosophies and becomes the founder of Existentialism, language is the external presentation of being, which means language should not be regarded as human expression or human activity in this sense. Therefore, language speaks, and symbolizes the appearance of heaven. As all things develop following heaven's way, or in other words nature's way, language and true name reveal one's true identity simply by speaking it out. Thus, to exist is to discover reveal and embrace one's true nature in language and true name, both of which are delivered as a soundless and heavenly song.

The soundless song is characterized with constant dynamic changes, and should by no means be considered as equivalent to dead silence. To be more specific, language is the "heavenly music" (287) and the sounds of silence. The language of heaven, whose definition consists of modifiers such as natural and silent, indicates the appearance and expansion of heaven and Tao that sings the song about beauty and being with soundless melodies yet vivid lyrics. What's more, it is exactly the sounds of silence, which indicate manifestation demonstration and illustration that inspire and motivate people to look for to see, and to listen to hear. The soundless song of Tao might at some point transcend all things, and thus, become the most active and dynamic roaming in the universe filled with changes to eventually reveal and summon the essence of life as well as the nature of death in a secretive silence. Consequently, the soundless song is silent but dynamic, not different from being, which is soundless but constantly changing.

The silence that can be found in the soundless song in the Earthsea world is spiritual and from soul, which roams in the spectrum of inner self and mentality. The perception, cognition and exploration of the soundless song are also carried out in the spiritual or metaphysical perspective. Specifically, in The Earthsea Cycle, Old Power, in accordance with the Tao in Taoist, can be detected in all things yet rises above all things as well. Old Power functions and develops in a way that follows the rules of nature that in silence, echo with the teachings of Laozi. For instance, in Tehanu, only when Therru shuts away the surrounding clutters and listens for the tiniest sound of

vitality and truth bursting out from within by meditating in the silent and peaceful forest, does she understand her real self, embrace her negative emotions, integrate all, and achieve completeness. Likewise, in reality, a person might find his or her heart disturbed by the external noise of worries, sorrows, and melancholies, but the soundless song of his or her spirit and soul never ceases. Another example can be found in *The Farthest Shore*, where prince Arren never voluntarily reveals his true name, but it does not prohibit Ged from grasping it at all. Arren's true name is Lebannen, which means Rowan tree in Old Speech and predicts its owner's great responsibility to restore order while banishing the evil powers. With words, the soundless song of Arren's true name already reveals its owner's nature and self in a peaceful and silent manner. Therefore, the soundless song of true name in the Earthsea world is spiritual.

The soundless song of true name and Tao also requires the silence, particularly the inner one, of the listeners as a necessary condition. More specifically, "language is not the simple daily life trivial noisy sound, but the sound of being" (Rosenfeld, 1976: p. 535). Nevertheless, the majority of people only listens to and hears the materialized noise in the worldly world, instead of the silent yet rhythmic sounds of being. As a result, in order to catch the soundless song of true name and comprehend the meaning of Tao, one is expected to temporarily shut down his or her physical sensory, logical reasoning, and even emotional empathy. By returning to peace and maintaining the inner tranquility, one can appreciate the song and even get a glimpse at the secret of life. In terms of *The Earthsea Cycle*, take *The Tombs of Atuan* as an instance. Tenar, the child of light, is unfortunately born in the suffocating and engulfing underground darkness. When she thinks nothing can be worse, Tenar is chosen to take the position of the woman priest to serve the Nameless Ones with no other purpose in life. Nonetheless, just as the external cluttering noise can by no means eradicate the soundless song of true name in the universe, the pitch-dark environment undoubtedly finds no means to conceal the radiant light bursting out from within. Eventually, the path to awakening and empowerment lies in front of the female protagonist as she recognizes that "she is not Tenar. She is not Arha. The gods are dead, the gods are dead" (Le Guin, 1968: p. 104). In consequence, it is in the harmonious union and integration of both the peace in the inner self and the tranquility in the external environment that everything reveals their true nature.

The soundless song of true name in Taoism and *The Earthsea Cycle* also guides the people to get rid of their personal desires driven by the materialized lust. Specifically, the settlement of heart and storage of cultures plays a significant part in Taoist beliefs, and requires men to "attain the utmost in Passivity, hold firm to the basis of Quietude" (191). Tao being a great sound that is hard to be heard cannot be explained or described. In fact, any attempt to interpret Tao's perfectness, without exceptions, always turns out to be but imperfect efforts with imperfect exploration medium. "Therefore: oftentimes, one strips oneself of passion in order to see the Secret of Life; Oftentimes, one regards life with passion in order to see its manifest forms" (33). Being desire free is the requirement for people to truly comprehend the soundless song of true name, because a person can integrate with Tao and glance at what is hidden above and behind only on the condition that he or she forsakes the personal desire and remains free from the interruptions of subjective judgments and opinions. Accordingly, in the Earthsea world, the protagonists, such as Ged, are constantly struggling to fight against their personal desires and act in accordance with the natural rules. Hence, the soundless song of true name asks people to focus on the construction of their spiritual homeland by discarding desires.

The soundless song of true name in *The Earthsea Cycle* and Taoism is the harmonious balance between the positive and the negative elements. According to Laozi's philosophical notion, no distinctive boundaries separating being from nonbeing exist. On the contrary, the concept of being and that of nonbeing are considered as one to use, which means the appearance of being is constantly accompanied by that of its counterpart. As a result, instead of endeavoring to exclude the personal desires, men are expected to actively transform from the state of being desire free to that of having desires all the time, which motivates men to keep the spirit of curiosity and exploration for venturing outwardly on the way to the pursuit of inner, external and the ultimate truth. For instance, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the strongest enemy of the protagonist, Ged, is the nameless shadow let out by himself due to his ignorance and arrogance at that time. Moreover, the only way to overcome the nameless evil has nothing to do with any dazzling performance of magic or violent scenes of physical combats. Contrastingly, simply by addressing the shadow with its true name, Ged, embracing the shadow to be a part of himself, and consequently accomplishing the wholeness as a person, Ged manages to restore peace and order for the Earthsea world. Therefore, the soundless song also sings good and evil as a pair of complementary elements, instead of the dichotomy of absolute pure good or definite inferior evil.

Based on the analysis above, it is illustrated with analysis of Taoism and examples in *The Earthsea Cycle* that the song of true name and Tao is a silent one. On the one hand, in *The Earthsea Cycle*, numerous episodes of the protagonists' adventures demonstrate how a person can effectively and accurately grasp true names without asking directly, which requires words and language as the medium. More importantly, the silence in the song of true name is not merely about the external elements, such as the environment. In fact, the soundless song of true name also plays the role as a prerequisite asking for the construction and the constantly refining process of a person's inner peace. It is the harmonious combination between the external silence and inner peace that leads

people to better listen to and comprehend this great yet soundless song of true name in the Earthsea world. The relationship between the internal and external tranquility is a dialectical one, which means inner peace lays a solid foundation for external tranquility, while the latter acts as an effective catalyst for the former. On the other hand according to Taoism, Tao, the way of life, nature and the universe, is also a soundless one. The soundless song of Tao, however, is drastically different from dead silence, because though soundless and silent, it is actually in constant and dynamic changes. Therefore, as can be seen in both Taoism and *The Earthsea Cycle*, the soundless song of true name never ceases. To regard all things from the perspective of the world, to listen to the silent speech of the way, and to reunite one's self with nature—this is the Taoist philosophy in the soundless song of true name in *The Earthsea Cycle*.

5. Conclusion

Naming lays the first stone for the construction of the palace of order and regulations, while true name, which carries the indication of true nature, acts as the essence of the Earthsea world, where the protagonists, under its influence, go on the adventures both outwardly and inwardly. More specifically, firstly, true name is the essence of Tao and the Earthsea World. In Taoist philosophy, names transform the original chaotic state of the world into an organized one with orders and regulations. Accordingly, in *The Earthsea Cycle*, true names are the most distinctive feature of the world functioning by magic and fantasy. Secondly, true name enables people to explore both inwardly and outwardly. In Taoism, the attempts to obtain names and explain things with languages actually act as a hindrance prohibiting people from understanding the essence of things. In *The Earthsea Cycle*, however, Le Guin depicts the adventures into the outside world and the inner spiritual homeland with the empowerment of true name, because Le Guin explores the meaning of languages and names from such a fundamental level as the essence of existence. Thirdly, true name sings a soundless song with silence in both Taoism and the Earthsea world. In Taoism, the sounds of heaven and the way require silence of the external environment and the person's spiritual status. Similarly, in *The Earthsea Cycle*, the protagonists do not achieve wholeness until they manage to sustain the inner peace and tranquility. Therefore, from the perspective of true name, Le Guin constructs *The Earthsea Cycle* drawing heavily upon the philosophical teaching in Taoism. In this sense, the fantastic Taoism in *The Earthsea Cycle* is demonstrated; *The Earthsea Cycle* can be regarded as a Taoist fantasy.

In terms of the improvements the future researchers are encouraged to pay attention to, there are three aspects that are of tremendous importance. Firstly, there are still quite a lot of elements and themes to be explored in *The Earthsea Cycle*. For example, in addition to true name, magic and dragons, the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, the dark tombs, Arha, Roke Island are to be further explored. Actually the list goes on and on. Secondly, in order to analyze Taoism's influence on her work more efficiently and effectively, Le Guin's interpretation of Tao Te Ching and the related Taoist philosophies should be compared with those of the other famous authors. Lastly, there exist good reasons to carry out the comparative study of the western literature and the oriental philosophy is the one to be applied in the academic research of other works as well, such as *The Alchemist* and *The Little Prince*. Consequently, it is expected that the future research in the related fields will include more diversified Earthsea elements, resort to comprehensive comparisons of different understandings about Taoism, and apply the similar research methodology to a wider range of works.

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¹ [Laotse. \(2012\)](#) . *The Wisdom of Laotse*. Trans. Lin Yutang. Anhui: Science and Technology Press. P. 33. The following references cited are all to this edition and the page number are included in the parentheses in the following text.

respectively with drastically different. backgrounds, exotic landscapes, and various protagonists. The first three books. are generally referred to as the first trilogy, while the later three the second tri-logy. With Le Guin's vivid depiction, the Eathsea world in all six books can be. alectical thinking in Taoism, proves the negative with the assistance of the posi-. tive, and holds the firm belief that light and darkness, good and evil, life and. death are al mutually interdependent. There is no need or possibility to ever. repudiate the existence of evil and death, or to pursue the unadulterated good. and uncorrupted immortality. The reason lies in that though named differently Tales of Earthsea keeps the big ideas and fantastical elements of those sources, but erases the human emotion. I found myself at turns confused by characters' motivations (why did Arren kill his father?) and annoyed by the convenient ways that they slotted into the film's themes (Therru decides she likes Arren just in time to rescue him). It's difficult to appreciate a story's take on ideas about mortality and love when those ideas are delivered by caricatures. Another aspect of both the Earthsea series and Ghibli that I find laudable is their willingness to take their young audiences serious! Earthsea is the world where the Earthsea stories and novels take place. The world of Earthsea is one of sea and islands: a vast archipelago of hundreds of islands surrounded by mostly uncharted ocean. The term "archipelago" is used to refer only to the central grouping of islands around the main island of Havnor and the Inmost Sea. The outlying islands are loosely grouped into four "Reaches" (West, North, South and East), and the Kargad Lands, four large islands to the northeast inhabited by the Le Guin's Earthsea cycle is one of the most influential fantasy books of the previous century. It has even been compared with the Lord of the Ring saga in its quality. It is impossible to deny its Taoist background, as it was written having this philosophical school in mind. *Fantasy and Taoism in the Earthsea Cycle*. *Advances in Literary Study*, 5(03), 39-55 Jung, C. G. (1964)

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