

The Tao of Rhetoric: Revelations From *The Tao of Steve*

Steven C. Combs

Loyola Marymount University

Abstract

Scholars have increasingly noted that classical Taoist (Daoist) thought offers important insights on rhetoric. The present study contributes to the development of a Taoist perspective on rhetorical theory and criticism through an analysis of the film *The Tao of Steve*. While the film appears to be a simple story of how a good girl saves a bad boy, it is also a portrayal of paradox that distinguishes important Eastern and Western worldviews and rhetorical principles. Furthermore, *The Tao of Steve* succeeds as an example of Taoist rhetoric because it presents Taoism paradoxically. This paper demonstrates the levels of meaning in the film that contribute to its paradoxicality, through intrinsic and extrinsic analysis, before considering its rhetorical implications.

Taoism (Daoism)¹ is the original native religion of China and remains one of its three major religions (Parrinder, 1983). Classical Taoist thought has “permeated every area of Chinese life: its culture, thought patterns, and state of mind” (Lu, 1998, p. 228). Virtually every “facet of Chinese civilization” has “been touched by it in some way” (Lui, 1986, p. vii). Nagel (1994) maintains that Taoism “is a key to understanding many phases of Chinese life, including religion, government, art, medicine, even cooking” (p. 8). Taoism also continues to affect all Asian countries influenced by China (Chan, 1963; Lui, 1986; Sun, 1995).

Scholars have explored classical Taoism because it offers important insights on rhetorical theory (Combs, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Crawford, 1996; Jensen, 1987, 1992; Lu, 1998; Oliver, 1961, 1971). Taoism has also been applied to rhetorical criticism (Combs, 2000b), extending Taoist rhetorical principles beyond theory and into the analysis of communication acts. The application of Taoism to rhetorical criticism offers “a unique vantage point for illuminating a rhetorical artifact or interaction” that “may provide important opportunities for insight about the nature of communication” (Combs, 2000b, p. 24).

An interesting opportunity exists for the further application of Taoism to

rhetorical criticism because of a recent, and surprisingly successful, independent film. *The Tao of Steve* (Goodman, 2001) tells the story of Dex, an overweight and modest thirty-something year-old who subscribes to a strategy known as the "Tao of Steve" in order to seduce women. His success in employing this strategy allows him to become romantically involved with beautiful and intelligent women who would otherwise seem unapproachable to a person of Dex's modest means and average looks.

The film is an inviting choice for Taoist critique because it purports to entail Taoist thought. Such a critique will show that Dex uses tactics that can be derived from Taoist thought, yet he violates the underlying rationale for those tactics. Furthermore, Dex is a student of philosophy and claims to be an adherent of Taoism, yet the female lead, Syd, who lacks such scholarly training, appears to be a more authentic Taoist than Dex. At a meta-level the film also makes a statement about Eastern and Western approaches to contradiction. The Western approach, which is exemplified by Dex, responds to potential contradictions by creating dichotomies and distinctions that stem from his dualistic world-view. Syd, whose standing in relation to Dex creates paradoxes, exemplifies the Eastern approach. Accordingly, the central claim of this paper is that *The Tao of Steve* succeeds as an example of Taoist rhetoric because it presents Taoism paradoxically.

This paper demonstrates the levels of meaning in the film that contribute to its paradoxicality by over-viewing Taoism and the film, then providing intrinsic and extrinsic analyses of *The Tao of Steve*, in order to consider implications for rhetorical theory and practice. The implications include an admonition regarding the misappropriation of Taoism, assessment of the potential for Western rhetoric to communicate the Tao, insight into culturally appropriate ways of engaging potential contradictions, and an example of the utility of using Taoist principles in rhetorical criticism.

Overviews

Before moving to a deep analysis of the film, it is important to consider basic elements of Taoism, particularly monism and its Western counterpart, dualism. Contrasting these Western and Taoist worldviews helps clarify the potential significance of the film. The Western adaptation of Plato's dualism is a fundamental, ubiquitous aspect of the Western philosophical and rhetorical tradition. Philosophically, Plato posits a dichotomy between an ideal world of truth and a world of appearance that is somewhat representative of the true reality. Hence, there is "a permanently real world and a changing world of appearance" (Ames, 1993, p. 47).

The one-world, or monistic, view of Taoism, the starting point for a number

of its key assumptions, contrasts sharply with the two-world, or dualistic, view of Western culture. In Taoism, "there is only one continuous concrete world that is the source and locus of all of our experience" (Ames, 1993, p. 49). There is no independent agent, such as a god, to provide order and life. The world's order simply "inheres in the world" (p. 50). Order is the natural consequence of the dynamic interaction of all life forms. The world's coherence is the result of the "many making one" (Jensen, 1992, p. 155). Because everything in the universe is constantly evolving and interacting, the inherent nature of reality is change (Ames, 1993).

The Tao (way) refers to and encompasses the essential nature of reality, which is dynamic and ever changing because of fluctuations in *yin* and *yang*. "*Yin* is female energy—like the earth it is motionless and still. *Yang* is male energy—fiery, vigorous" (Combs, 2000b, p. 25). Lao Tzu² says "The motionless grandeur came up out of the earth; the fiery vigour burst out from heaven. The two penetrated one another, were inextricably blended and from their union the things of the world were born" (Waley, 1982, p. 16). Hence, the blend of *yin* and *yang*, and its endless combinations, creates the various facets of the universe and connects all things (Nagel, 1994).

Because reality is constituted by the combination of all things, the Tao, too, is all things. It may be thought of as the ultimate state of being; the realm where the ongoing process of change is both initiated and completed in the unification of all things (Blofeld, 1985; Watts, 1975). Followers of the Tao attempt to align themselves with the way, or essential nature, of the universe. Their philosophy emphasizes the natural harmony and balance that underlie reality.

While the elements of Taoism in the film are significant, and will be discussed later, the basic story is about the transformation of Dex, a bright, underachieving thirty-year-old male who is unwilling or unable to make a commitment to a particular woman. Dex combines a Western fantasy of masculinity with bits of Daoist philosophy to create an ongoing strategy of womanizing—"The Tao of Steve."

The opening scene, a ten-year college reunion, introduces the idea that Dex hasn't changed since college. The reunion also gives us a sense of Western idealized notions of the possible self, from the perspective of a man who has "returned" to college (an American dream in itself), after a number of years. There is a priest, one who has a strong relationship with God, an unfulfilled woman (Beth) who is "married with baggage," her husband (Ed), the businessman, who is happy and has a perfect home for his business life, yet has no idea that his wife is miserable and unfaithful. There is also a happily married couple (Rick and Maggie), a successful professional who designs opera sets and plays drums in her spare time (Syd), and Dex, the brightest person in his class, now content to be a "slacker." Dex is always "scamming" on women, usually

with great success.

The scene is also notable because of who is not there. Dex has three roommates (Chris, Matt, and Dave) who play significant roles in his life. The "Tao of Steve," is revealed in the relationships between Dex and his roommates, particularly Dave, his young disciple. The "Tao of Steve" refers to having the state of mind of "Steveness" when approaching relationships with women. This is a metaphor for the ideal male—a blend of elements of Eastern wisdom with the on-screen persona of Steve McQueen, especially noted for his unflappable bravery and motorcycle riding in *The Great Escape*. McQueen never tries to impress women, but "he always gets the girl." Steve, however, is not simply a name; it is a state of mind. James Bond and Spiderman are Steve's. The opposite of a Steve is a Stu. A Stu is uncool, exemplified by Barney Fife, Gomer Pyle, and Jugghead.

The reunion establishes the starting point, or baseline, of Dex's transformation from an emotionally immature womanizer to a man willing to commit to a monogamous relationship. Dex is driven by a fear of rejection and of settling for an inadequate relationship. He is transformed by Syd, who leads him to acknowledge that he is simply another underachieving "guy on the make" who brings pain to others through his drive for self-gratification. Eventually, Dex is transformed from a womanizer to a man who stands ready to risk rejection and commit to Syd. In so doing, he has disavows the three rules of Steve.

Intrinsic Analysis

Intrinsic analysis of a text derives the standards of assessment from the text itself, offering potential insight into the text's internal workings. In this case, the analysis will consider the gist of Dex's Tao, the Three Rules of Steve. These rules will be examined in order to better understand them and note the role the "Tao of Steve" plays in the transformation of Dex. This analysis will reveal a contradiction between the substance of Taoist philosophy and the strategies Dex derives from that philosophy. Dex's strategies often mimic Taoist thought, but they distort the underlying philosophical basis for those strategies. Furthermore, the analysis will show that there is a contradiction between the way Dex treats women in general and the way he treats Syd in specific. The contradiction, and its resolution, signifies Dex's transformation and ultimate abandonment of the "Tao of Steve."

The Three Rules of Steve provide a mantra for relationships with women: (1) detach yourself from desire; (2) be excellent in her presence; and (3) after you have done these two things, retreat. The Rules are an appropriate source for critical analysis because they are suggested by the text itself, thus giving them a sympathetic vantage point for viewing the text. The rules are also significant

because Dex uses them successfully in general, but not in the case of Syd. In fact, Syd “out Tao’s” Dex by upholding the rules and conquering Dex, while Dex abandons his rules, shamelessly pursuing Syd and realizing his underlying lack of fulfillment.

The First Rule of Steve is explained in the course of Frisbee golf and poker games. While playing golf, Dex scores a hole in one while playing with Rick, Chris, Matt, and Dave. One of his friends says “very Steve.” Dave, who appears younger than the rest and fairly new to the group, expresses his excitement about a woman he is courting. Dex says that if Dave is as excited as he sounds, then he is “already dead in the water.” Dave is violating the “First Rule of Steve”: eliminate your desire. Dex and Rick explain that Dave will have a much better chance of having sex with his woman if he doesn’t want sex than if he does. If a man’s agenda is sexual, women will use their innate ability to discover the man’s motives. Hence, the best approach is to satisfy desire by having no desire. That will cause who you desire to desire you as well.

That night the men are playing poker, and Dex smokes a cigarette, explaining that he should not be able to have sex with such attractive and interesting women, given his looks and low level of career success. He attributes his success with women, his ability to have sex with women, to his strategy of not pursuing them. This perplexes women, who are used to being pursued and fighting off their pursuers, leading them to be attracted to him because he appears not to be attracted to them in a sexual way. Dex explains later that, “Women want to have sex like fifteen minutes after us. So if you hold out for twenty, she’ll be chasing you for five.”

As proof of the power of the first rule, the next scene begins with a shot of a bookcase, Dex’s bookcase in his bedroom, which reveals his collection of philosophical treatises. Dex is strumming a guitar in the background while Julie, the bartending student he met at the reunion, is browsing the shelf and admiring the collection.

“You’ve got so many great books,” says Julie. “The better to seduce you with,” mutters Dex to himself. “What,” replies Julie. “All the better to deduce the truth with,” he replies. She then remarks that in certain ways, she is having a better time than she did on her last date. Dex says that he doesn’t consider this a date. He is only interested in being her friend, and doesn’t want any romantic entanglements to spoil their friendship. Dex is obviously courting the woman. He has pursued her since the reunion, fixed her dinner and drinks, and now is playing the guitar for her in the bedroom. Yet he denies what is obvious in order to perplex Julie. Dex thus uses avoidance and passive detachment to propel Julie’s desire for him.

It obviously works, because the next scene shows Dex waking up next to Julie, who is still sleeping. He goes into the kitchen to make some coffee and

spots Syd from the kitchen window. She is jogging along the side of the road, looking very fit. Dex, in a classic display of eliminating his desire for Julie, expresses a clear interest in Syd. The problem is that he is violating his own rule because he has desire for Syd. It becomes clear that Dex is generally successful in his romantic strategy, but he appears to have met his match in Syd's case.

The notion of detachment from desire is consistent with Taoism. Chuang Tzu³ says, "if you abandon the affairs of the world, your body will be without toil" (trans. 1964, p. 118).⁴ Furthermore, the strategy of subduing an enemy without fighting is a basic principle in Sun Tzu's classic text on warfare (Sun Tzu, in Ames, 1993).⁵ Sun Tzu also advocates being formless, thereby making it impossible for an enemy to anticipate an attack (Sawyer, 1994).

These occasional analogs to Taoist philosophy are violated on the whole because Dex does not truly start from a standpoint where he is detached from the outcome. The first rule is prompted by the desire to have sex. Hence, the motivational state behind everything is impure. Rather than truly be detached, Dex gives the appearance of non-desire in order to satisfy his true desire. Dex justifies this by claiming that he is not being manipulative but adjusting to the timetable of the woman. Both men and women want to have sex, they just have different schedules. A man who wants to achieve his objective must adapt to the woman's timetable, arousing her desire by waiting longer than she wants, thus ensuring there will be sexual contact that is motivated by strong desire. The man does this by expressing a negative attitude about having sex in order to hasten the woman's desire to have sex. Hence, a Steve will give the appearance of indifference, attempting to be formless, in order to prevent defense from the attack.

This interpretation of Taoism is inappropriate, because it allows for practices that violate Taoist principles. Dex's is not aligned with pure detachment, but is goal oriented and self-interested. Nagel (1994) points out, "the pursuit of gain and fame is not a proper human course, according to the Way" (Nagel, 1994, p. 8). Dex violates the essence of detachment from desire, the substantial philosophical element, but nonetheless tactically feigns detachment, the strategic element, in order to achieve his objectives.

Not only does Dex hold an inappropriate view of Taoism, but also he is unable to enact his version of Taoism in the case of Syd, who constantly challenges Dex's notion of eliminating desire. Dex asks her out the first time they ride in a car together, tells her he is falling in love with her at a pool party, fixes her wreck of a motorbike, shamelessly pursues her on a camping trip, and finally, follows her to New York.

Dex and Dave are hanging out at the house when Dex tells Dave the "Second Rule of Steve": do something excellent. Dex explains that everybody is excellent at something. Figure out what you are excellent at, then do it in her

presence, thus demonstrating your sexual worthiness. Dex is excellent at philosophy, and he constantly uses his charisma and intelligence to express his excellence.

Once again, Dex's interpretation of Taoism is suspect. He is correct in saying that people have innate talent that can distinguish them from others, but he is wrong in advocating the display of excellence. Chuang Tzu, in fact, advises people of the danger of being conspicuous.

Don't you know about the praying mantis that waved its arms angrily in front of an approaching carriage, unaware that they were incapable of stopping it? Such was the high opinion it had of its talents. Be careful, be on your guard! If you offend him by parading your store of talents, you will be in danger! (Chuang Tzu, trans. 1964, p. 59)

Chuang Tzu advises people to "blend in with the crowd, stay out of the spotlight, and avoid conflict" (Combs, 2001, p. 10). Virtue is not characterized by demonstrations of excellence, but by "limpidity, silence, emptiness, and inaction" (Lu, 1998, p. 243).

Although the Second Rule of Steve is not grounded in Taoist thought, Dex still finds it difficult to maintain consistency with his own standard because of Syd's intellect and beauty. On the first morning they are to ride to work together, Syd arrives at Dex's house as agreed—at 7:30 sharp. Dex answers the door in his pajamas, and leads Syd to his bedroom, where Dex pulls out a bong and takes several long hits of pot to prepare him for the morning. Syd observes that Dex smokes pot for breakfast and works part-time, yet of all the people she knew in college, he was one of the most gifted and seemed to have tremendous potential. In Syd's opinion, Dex is not being excellent in her presence.

Syd asks Dex if he ever wanted to do more with his life. Not really, says Dex. "Doing stuff is overrated. Like Hitler, he did a lot. But don't we all wish he would have just stayed home and gotten stoned?" Syd challenges his overly simplistic dichotomy: "I see. So the only options are to get stoned or commit genocide?" Dex remarks, "Lao Tzu said, 'The sage, because he does nothing never ruins anything.' Buddha said, 'Passionlessness is the best of virtues.'" Syd is unimpressed: "And the Pillsbury Doughboy said, 'Eat me when you're ready.'"

A couple of days later, Syd arrives to pick up Dex after work. Syd says that she needs to stop at the opera house and pick up some work. The opera house is a magnificent place that foreshadows the quality of its performances. Syd is treated with the courtesy and respect that a professional such as her would merit. She also moves easily and freely throughout the place, displaying her general sense of comfort in a high-class establishment. Dex, meanwhile, knocks over some props.

Dex is also inept throughout an overnight camping trip. He is obviously out

of shape, constantly laboring on the trail. At night, he renders his tent unusable defending himself against a spider. On the hike home he has to stop and be rescued because he thinks he is having a heart attack. Meanwhile, Syd is extremely fit, moving easily, and is very adept in the natural world.

At this point in the film, Dex has failed on two counts: he has repeatedly expressed his desire for Syd to her and has been largely unexcellent in her presence. Meanwhile, Syd has been fairly spectacular in Dex's company. She is a better "Steve" than is Dex, remaining detached and displaying excellence in Dex's presence.

The Third Rule of Steve is that, after eliminating desire and doing something excellent in her presence, one must retreat. Dex displays this principle throughout the film. We meet many of the considerable number of women that Dex has slept with, but none of his past relationships were meaningful and all were short lived.

Once again, Dex's strategy may be found in Taoism, but the underlying philosophical substance is distorted. The strategy of using retreat can be supported if it is an attempt to harmonize or balance the universe. For instance, using retreat to attack may be an example of using *yin* to balance *yang*. Lao Tzu points out, "what is softest in the world drives what is hardest in the world" (in Cleary, 1999, p. 30).

Unfortunately, Dex's circumstances and mindset are inconsistent with Taoism. For instance, the phrase, "We pursue that which retreats from us," is more likely to come from Heidegger than Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu taught that all straining, all striving are not only vain but also counterproductive. The fact that the "Tao of Steve" is studied, cultivated, and turned into rules suggests that it does not represent truth. True insight is not "learned." Lao Tzu says, "Detach from learning and you have no worries" (in Cleary, 1999, p. 18).

Hence, using retreat as a strategy can only be justified if it stems spontaneously from one's nature, not if it is a method to achieve self-gratification. Furthermore, while *yin* energy may be appropriate when *yang* has disturbed the balance of the universe, Dex is interested only in sexual gratification and not the harmony of the universe. In fact, Dex's deployment of this strategy frequently is unharmonious, because its deceptiveness is painful to the women he seduces.

In addition to the tension between Dex's version of Taoist strategy and its underlying substance, Dex fails to follow his rule when it comes to Syd. Dex "conquered" Syd, sleeping with her a few days before she was scheduled to leave for New York. This scenario, for the Dex we see at the reunion, would be perfect. It would undoubtedly be used eventually as an object lesson in Dave's discipleship. Instead, Dex violates his own rule, following Syd to New York in the final scene of the film. In fact, Dex violates every rule with Syd, showing

that by the standards prescribed by the Three Rules of Steve, Dex is a Stu, not a Steve. If anything, Syd more closely approximates a Steve than does Dex. Hence, the resolution of the film is for Dex to reject his view of Taoism.

Finally, it is clear that Dex's Tao is not the Tao of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. While Dex quotes strategic elements of Taoism, these strategies contradict the substance of Taoism. While Dex could resolve the contradiction by becoming a true Taoist, he chooses instead to resolve the contradiction between substance and form, philosophy and strategy, by abandoning Taoism.

Intrinsic analysis reveals that Dex avoids rejection by sleeping with many women. His strategy works seamlessly to accomplish this objective. By masking his approach to an objective he engages through noninvolvement and attacks through retreat. Hence, Dex's Taoism is used to shield him from the sequence of approach and rejection. Dex's Tao provides a grounding for his womanizing, enabling him to avoid being vulnerable. It helps him justify his existence and resist change. When Dex is motivated to change he abandons the strategy, which breeds success in something about which he is not presently interested, in favor of an approach that is tried and true in Western culture.

Extrinsic Analysis

While the "Tao of Steve" is rejected in the film, an important question remains: Does the film recommend the abandonment of philosophical Taoism, as espoused by Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, or simply the rejection of Dex's version of the Tao? The answer is significant, because the sense that Dex rejects Taoism, derived from the intrinsic analysis, may constitute a premature conclusion. The following section offers an answer to this question through an extrinsic analysis of the text. Extrinsic elements are factors outside of the text that may illuminate the text by providing a unique vantage point for analysis.

Given the focus in the film on Taoism, it is appropriate to consider fundamental views of Taoism to determine the ways in which the film is consonant or dissonant with Taoism, as well as the film's deeper meaning. The fundamental elements of Taoism, beyond those mentioned in the introduction of this paper, are the notion of unity, the natural way, effortlessness, and the values of balance and harmony. Examination of these principles indicates that Dex's "Tao" is not representative of Taoism, while Syd exemplifies a number of Taoist qualities.

Lao Tzu says that "sages embrace unity as a model for the world" (in Cleary, 1999, p. 20). Because the Tao is the unification of all things, Taoists believe that people err when they see distinctions in the world. When one labels something as "good" it is because one fails to see that the thing being labeled is part of the whole. It has positive qualities and negative qualities. Seeing it as good indicates that the observer is focusing on a facet of the observed thing and is unable to see

its completeness. Making distinctions, for example, perceiving something as good or bad, is “the fundamental error in life” (Graham, 1989, p. 186). Because of the unity of all things, one cannot advocate a particular perspective without potentially losing sight of the Tao.

Several key scenes in the film show that Dex does not see the unity that is the world; instead, he constantly makes distinctions and judgments. It has already been noted that Dex dichotomizes Taoism, upholding certain tactics while negating their underlying rationale. He distinguishes between good and bad marriages to justify his affair with a married woman. In one scene Dex admits that he is a “fatist,” that he is not attracted to fat women even though he has a large belly himself. He says he is a “fat fatist”—the worst kind because he holds others to standards that he does not feel obliged to maintain for himself. The Second Rule of Steve, demonstrate excellence, distinguishes between certain types of behavior, labeling some as excellent while others are not. Finally, the dichotomy between Steve and Stu is a powerful statement of the distinctions Dex regularly makes.

Syd, on the other hand, is far less likely to draw distinctions in the manner of Dex. She does not distinguish between types of marriage, and although thin herself, says that she would have no problem dating a fat man. In fact, at the end of the film she does. Although she labels Dex a “slacker,” she bases this on the fact that Dex does not live up to his potential, that he is not being true to his nature.

To Chuang Tzu, “the constant flux and transformation of nature signifies the universal process that makes everything as one” (Combs, 2000b, p. 25). Taoism is grounded in the natural order of things, consequently, there is “a deep appreciation of nature” (Nagel, 1994, p. 8). Taoists believe, therefore, that one must adapt to nature and avoid imposing human ways (Chan, 1963). One who is with the Tao would be expected to appreciate and find comfort in the natural world.

Dex constantly demonstrates his alienation with nature. While others pack the car for a camping trip, Dex smokes a cigarette. Rick and Maggie question his ability and desire to go on a rigorous hike. Dex says with plenty of bluster, “I love camping.” Later, Dex struggles mightily to keep pace with the others on the hike. He is obviously in bad shape, and his cigarette smoking doesn’t help. But he denies to everyone that he is having a problem. The song playing in the sound track is, “I lied about being the outdoor type.” When Syd and Dex arrive at the campsite, they sit on a rock, where Syd uses an inhaler while Dex lights up a cigarette. She offers the inhaler to Dex who uses it between puffs on a cigarette. It is clear that Dex is totally out of his element in the pristine natural world. The dichotomy in these shots, between Syd using an inhaler to purify her lungs and Dex smoking a cigarette to return his lungs to their poisonous usual state,

exemplifies the differences between Dex and Syd in regard to their consonance with nature.

While one may be tempted to argue that Dex is true to his nature, because he is contemplative and comfortable with his lack of ambition, this claim is inaccurate. If Dex were acting within his true nature his serenity and harmony would be obvious. Instead, Dex is obviously uncomfortable with himself, constantly smoking, eating, drinking, or talking. He is obsessive, compulsive, and harmful to his health because he is not living in harmony. His true nature is submerged beneath his complex rational view of the world, and the self we see is constantly fighting itself. Syd, on the other hand is an accomplished professional who still does a credible job as a drummer in a rock band, jogs, hikes, and maintains a trim and healthy physique. Her quiet and stillness, noted by her sparse dialogue and a scene where she convinces Dex to stop talking and enjoy a quiet float in a water pond, indicate the extent to which she is true to her nature. Syd never directly calls attention to herself, but Dex always notices when she is around.

To be with the Tao is to discern the natural flow of things and move in accord, thus exerting no effort in actions. An understanding of "the principles, structures, and trends of human and natural affairs" allows one to use "the least amount of energy in dealing with them," allowing one to take "the line of least resistance in all one's actions" (Watts, 1975, p. 76). "The result is that one's actions are effortless yet perfect" (Combs, 2000b, p. 25). It becomes "possible to move like a leaf on a stream of water" (p. 25). Actionlessness, or effortless action, is referred to as *wu-wei*. It is the innate movement that harmonizes everything (Lu, 1998). *Wu-wei* suggests "only trouble is made by those who strive to improve themselves and the world by forceful means" (Watts, 1975, p. 81).

Not surprisingly, Dex regularly violates the principle of *wu wei*. His life is dedicated to conquering, overcoming the resistance of women to typical male advances. His psychological assaults on the women he tries to seduce are perhaps as violative of others as one who uses overt physical means to overcome resistance. Dex knows what he is doing, and deliberately seeks out women with low standards, as he confessed to Syd, Rick, and Maggie at dinner, so that he can achieve his objectives. The fact that he must regularly lie is also an indication that Dex rarely takes the path of least resistance. Instead, he takes the path of reducing the resistance of others. He does not find the gentle flow, which is actually quite difficult for most people, and is dominated by a goal oriented, self-serving mentality. The effort that Dex must ultimately exert to win over Syd indicates that he is not with the Tao.

Syd, in contrast, accomplishes everything by doing nothing. She is a valued professional who never appears to work hard or strive to get ahead. She is in

Dex's life because of her opera job, and her next one is lined up before she leaves. Most significantly, she is able to induce Dex to abandon his questionable ways, something he has clung to since his college days, with virtually no effort. Syd invites Dex to look at himself and see through the rationalizations and other defense mechanisms into a deeper level of himself. She does not give speeches, gifts, or threats. Lao Tzu notes that "to speak rarely is natural. That is why a gusty wind doesn't last the morning, a downpour of rain doesn't last the day" (in Cleary, 1999, p. 20). Syd is who she is, points out how Dex affects others, finishes her professional work, and moves on. Dex does all of the work in the relationship, while Syd seems satisfied with whatever happens. If Dex is the man of her dreams he will come around. If he doesn't come around, then he is not the man of her dreams and she hasn't lost a step in life's journey.

Because of the belief that reality is unitary, a single, unending combination of all things, Taoism values balance and harmony. Balance and harmony stem from the one-world view and the movement of *yin* and *yang* (Combs, 2000b). Harmony, in fact, is the central goal of human activity (Ames, 1993; Sun, 1995). Balance also correlates with harmony; to be in harmony is to live in balance, the ideal natural state. Finally, "harmony is also the result of right action. When one moves in accordance with nature, one's effortlessness contributes to the well being of the universe.

Dex's restlessness, oral excesses, constant need for sexual conquest, and deceptions indicate a lack of harmony and balance. The whole point of the "Tao of Steve" is to avoid a balance between intimacy and rejection. Rather, Dex avoids rejection by women by refusing to be intimate with them. The whole point of the Third Rule of Steve is to leave when the relationship threatens to become deeper.

While hiking home from the campout, Dex suffers what he thinks is a heart attack. Fortunately, the doctor tells Dex that he did not suffer a heart attack, but he is imperiled because of his obesity and smoking. He is told that his excesses constitute serious problems that need to be changed—"your life does depend on it," says the doctor.

Dex responds to this life-changing news by making a pile of peanut butter sandwiches, which is to be his new diet. Rick chides Dex, telling him the diet, which apparently will consist solely of peanut butter sandwiches, is as ridiculous as his pizza diet (where Dex points out he lost 25 pounds) or the sleeping diet (Dex lost 30 pounds but he also lost his job). The diets are extreme and unhealthy. Ultimately, they fail because Dex is still overweight and has not achieved long-term weight management. Hence, Dex is seriously unbalanced.

In addition, the film shows that Syd harmonizes Dex's overabundance of *yang*. Dex is constantly smoking, talking, and conquering. Syd, on the other hand, expresses her *yin* in her receptiveness of nature, quiet, and ability to

“overcome through her stillness.” She teaches by doing not by talking. She also has a lot of *yang*—she is physically strong, rides a motorcycle, creates opera sets, and is willing to confront Dex intellectually. Hence, Dex’s transformation is a movement toward Syd’s balance. Dex begins to get quieter. He is no longer seen with fire (smoking) but accepts Syd’s offer to float quietly in the water. He blows out a candle in his bedroom. The final shots in the film abound in harmony.

The preceding analysis indicates that Dex is alienated from the Tao while Syd exemplifies many Taoist traits. Furthermore, Dex’s transformation results from intuitively sensing the harmonious balance that inheres in Syd. Significantly, Dex’s self-serving and inaccurate version of Taoism is ultimately rejected in favor of a true representation of Taoism. Since Dex’s views are not truly Taoist, and Syd’s are, the film affirms philosophical Taoism.

Implications and Conclusion

Both of the analyses conducted thus far yield unique insights about the text. Intrinsic analysis reveals a contradiction between the substance of Taoist philosophy and the strategies Dex derives from that philosophy. The analysis also shows that there is a contradiction in the way Dex treats Syd compared to all other women. The contradictions are resolved when Dex abandons the “Tao of Steve.” Extrinsic analysis shows that Dex’s Tao is inconsistent with Taoist thought, while Syd exemplifies consonance with Taoism. Dex’s transformation leads him to Syd, thus affirming philosophical Taoism and rejecting a sham Taoism. Interestingly, the conclusions drawn from the intrinsic analysis, that Taoism is rejected, and extrinsic analysis, that Taoism is affirmed, are paradoxical.

These insights make it possible to answer a remaining question. Does the film communicate its ideas in a manner compatible with the Tao? The answer to this question allows clear consideration of the extent to which the present study makes a significant contribution to an understanding of rhetorical theory and practice. Rhetorical analysis of *The Tao of Steve* reveals that the film not only maintains philosophical Taoism, but also is an excellent example of Taoist rhetoric.

Scholars have noted recurring rhetorical principles that stem from Taoism, typifying Taoist communication principles. “Taoist rhetoric” may therefore be considered “a genre of rhetoric possessing unique substantive and strategic elements” (Combs, 2000b, p. 24). Much like philosophical Taoism, rhetorical Taoism has an internal dynamic, major substantive elements, and key strategic principles (Combs, 2000b). The internal dynamic and major substantive and strategic elements of rhetorical Taoism will be noted and applied to *The Tao of*

Steve as a test of the film's consistency with the Taoist rhetorical genre.

Previous work maintains that "the touchstone for appropriate communication, and internal dynamic that distinguishes Daoist rhetoric from other categories of discourse, is the *dao* itself. Daoist rhetoric makes the *dao* the centerpiece of communication" (Combs, 2000b, p. 24). Hence, "invoking the Dao through language... enacts a commitment to communicate in a manner that is internally consistent with Daoism" (p. 24).

Given the holistic view of Taoism, it should not be surprising that the essential elements of Taoist philosophy are also important in rhetoric, namely unity, the natural way, effortlessness, and balance and harmony. Unity, or non-distinction, takes on added meaning, when considered from the standpoint of communication, because of its assumptions regarding language. The oneness that constitutes reality includes all things, even those which cannot be represented linguistically. Since the Tao is inclusive of all and is ever changing, no names or symbols can sufficiently describe it because language only captures pieces of reality. Chuang Tzu says, "if the Way is made clear, it is not the Way" (Chuang Tzu, trans. 1964, p. 39). Furthermore, "once things are put into words, their rich, subtle, and profound meaning is lost" (Lu, 1998, p. 245). Consequently, naming is useful, but "it can never fully embrace or represent the real nature of the thing" (p. 234). Yet Chuang Tzu believes that appropriate language can move people towards the Tao, thereby achieving "true harmony of opinions rather than... false dichotomies and opposites" (p. 244).

Two rhetorical strategies, in particular, have been identified as examples of Taoist rhetorical strategy: evocativeness and parsimony (Combs, 2000a, 2001). Evocativeness refers to an essential element of Chuang Tzu's rhetorical strategy. In fact, "the defining characteristic of Chuang Tzu's rhetorical strategy is evocativeness—the use of rhetoric designed to induce others to join in a communication interaction and engage in self-persuasion" (Combs, 2001). Chuang Tzu uses rhetorical forms such as paradoxes and parables that induce his audience to engage in self-persuasion. The method is simply to "goad the reader into self-scrutiny and awaken him into becoming himself in the world" (Wu, 1982, p. 24).

Chuang Tzu's style beckons us to complete in our own lives what he initiated. It is as though Chuang Tzu begins an interesting story, with conflicting but persuasive ingredients thrown in and even an unbelievable plot laid out, and then suddenly chops it off. The intrigued reader is left on his own to complete the story in his own life. (Wu, 1982, p. 16)

Hence, Chuang Tzu provides us with stories that never end. As such, they are metaphors for the eternal Tao. Through evocation, Chuang Tzu successfully enacts a rhetorical strategy consonant with his view of Taoism. His rhetorical forms do not rely on a literal conveyance of meaning through language, but spur

audiences to interpret and construct their meanings. They flow naturally and effortlessly because the audience, not the rhetor, must actively construct meanings.

An additional rhetorical strategy, particularly appropriate for contentious situations, can be inferred from the work of Sun Tzu in the monumental work *Art of War*. His strategy for contentious rhetoric is parsimony, "the use of extreme economy in the expenditure of resources" (Combs, 2000a, p. 277). The underlying principle for parsimonious rhetoric is to "exert the minimum level of resources needed to restore harmony" (p. 283). A military commitment, or rhetorical exchange, is designed "to achieve victory at the minimum cost" (Ames, 1993, p. 85). There is no harmony in annihilating an opponent or wasting resources.

Parsimony means do not engage in contentious rhetoric if it can be avoided. One pressures the enemy into surrender without battle. If it is necessary to do so, "the farsighted ruler approaches battle with prudence, and the good commander moves with caution" (Sun Tzu in Ames, 1993, p. 166). Sun Tzu says that "in joining battle, seek the quick victory" (in Ames, 1993, p. 107) and avoid protracted battle because of the huge expense in lives and equipment (Ames, 1993; Griffith, 1963; Huang, 1993; Sawyer, 1994). Nagel (1994) puts it parsimoniously: "Think before you speak; ration your own words. Remember, you are one of many" (p. 71). Hence, Sun Tzu suggests that messages be enacted economically.

The preceding observations provide a basis for rhetorical analysis, by indicating benchmarks of and strategies for appropriate communication. Applying these benchmarks, or critical standards, to *The Tao of Steve* indicates that the film relies on substantive and strategic elements of rhetorical Taoism. First, extrinsic analysis reveals that the film uses Taoism as its internal dynamic. The film is the story of a person who jettisons a false and dichotomous Tao for a unified and authentic Tao. Examining Dex and Syd as communicators reveals additional substantive Taoist elements. Dex employs dualities and crucial distinctions, is alienated from his true nature and the natural world, and engages in ardent conquests that disrupt harmony and hurt him and others. Syd, contrarily, shuns dualities, is natural, and moves effortlessly.

Syd's character is also highly evocative. Although Syd spurred Dex's growth, it ultimately resulted from his actively confronting his integrity. The vehicle for Dex's transformation is himself, although he is propelled by the presence of Syd.

The film is also evocative because of its use of paradox. The intrinsic and extrinsic analyses leave us with the paradox that Dex has both abandoned and embraced the Tao. This paradox is latent in the film, waiting to be evoked or called forth by the audience. If the audience is evoked to supply the missing

contextual elements of Taoism, then they will see the paradox between the intrinsic and extrinsic views. In this sense, the film uses the sort of paradox seen in *Chuang Tzu* to goad the audience to deeper levels of insight.

It should be pointed out that the extrinsic view of the film does not end the conversation. The conclusion of the film retains its evocativeness because it is ambiguous. We do not know if Dex is sincere, or has merely adapted a new philosophical stance in order to conquer the otherwise unassailable Syd. Perhaps Dex has not embraced Taoism, but is instead fulfilling a Machiavellian quest for a prize. In addition, the audience does not know what comes of the relationship between the two stars. Maybe they will have a great few weeks, but what happens the next time Syd undertakes an out of town job? Will Dex continue to follow her? We don't even know how they feel about kids! An even more fundamental question, in certain respects, is what does Syd see in Dex? She never succumbs to his "Tao of Steve." Something else, that is unclear in the film, attracts Syd to Dex. There are far too many questions beyond the scope of this paper for the film to end at the extrinsic level. What is becoming clear is that *The Tao of Steve* provides a creditable example of Taoist rhetoric. While the passage of time will provide an ever-securer vantage point, it is likely to be a highly evocative film.

Analyzing Dex and Syd as communicators also reveals elements of parsimony in the film. Dex's character is always talking, to the point where Syd and others ask him to be quiet. Furthermore, Dex's avoidance of the truth forces him to offer a string of lies to maintain the appearance of consistency. Syd, on the other hand, says little and does much by her actions. When she does confront Dex's dualities she exerts the minimum resources in order to refute him.

The film is also parsimonious on a meta-level because it relies less on dialogue and more on imagery to communicate its ideas. The film also takes an economical approach to its point in the sense that Dex is given two clear alternatives from which to choose--Syd and Dave. Syd allows Dex a glimpse of a true Tao and its potential for harmony, Dave represents the shallow and selfish path that Dex has thus far traveled.

There are four conclusions, emanating from the present study, regarding the significance of *The Tao of Steve*. The first is that the film serves as an admonition regarding the misappropriation of Taoism. Dex's strategies emanate from the Tao, without being grounded in the Tao, making Dex a metaphor for Westerners who sometimes misuse Asian thought in a dualistic world. As Westerners continue to encounter Asian thought they might be inclined to ignore its cultural foundations and choose strategy and tactics over substance and holistic understanding.

In some ways, *The Tao of Steve* is a second coming of *The Karate Kid* (Avildsen, 1984). In that film, Mr. Miyagi teaches martial arts not for the sake of

conquering opponents, but as a vehicle for learning important Eastern values. His adversary in the film, sensei John Kreese, runs the Cobra Kai, a dojo that values winning awards. They use martial arts as strategies and tactics for personal gain and fulfillment. The film points out how the underlying purity of Asian thought is lost in the Cobra Kai dojo and how Mr. Miyagi's approach, an integration of substance and strategy, is the only proper approach. The dojo analogy is not a fiction. Many people in the United States have learned Eastern martial arts techniques without studying its philosophical undercurrent. *The Tao of Steve* warns against such misuses of Taoist thought by villainizing Dex's bastardization of Taoism.

A second conclusion is that the film illustrates appropriate ways of communicating a Taoist message. Dex uses inappropriate communication practices, focusing on personal gain, not illumination of the Tao. He lives in a world of dichotomy and distinction rather than unity. He is alienated from nature, using logic, citation of expert testimony, and information gleaned from books rather than intuitive insights expressed nonverbally or silently. Dex is verbose, exerts much effort, and lacks balance and harmony. Syd, who communicates appropriately, is unified, natural, and effortless. She says little, but speaks volumes by her demeanor and actions. At a meta-level, the film communicates an evocative message, because of its use of paradox, and a parsimonious one, because of its reliance on visual images rather than dialogue and the clarity of the two choices confronting Dex.

The third conclusion to be derived is that *The Tao of Steve* offers insight into culturally appropriate ways of engaging potential contradictions. Dex exemplifies the Western approach popularized by Plato, while Syd demonstrates an Eastern approach.

One of Plato's primary ways of dealing with potential contradictions is to dichotomize, essentially saying that the contradiction does not exist because two different things are being considered. Hence, Plato can contradict himself by using rhetoric to say that rhetoric is immoral (Nienkamp, 1999), yet claim that no contradiction exists because he dichotomizes an idea with a crucial distinction. Plato argues that rhetoric, while generally bad, is acceptable when a philosopher, one who has studied and knows the truth about reality, uses it. Thus, there is a good rhetoric and a bad rhetoric, distinguished by the nature of the user. Aristotle makes a similar move, saying that rhetoric is a neutral instrument, while it is the user who is either ethical or unethical. For Plato, the contradiction is avoided because "the ends justify the means," and one guided by philosophy can discern the greater good. Aristotle, rather than distinguish good and bad rhetorics, divides rhetoric, the instrument, from the speaker, the user. By placing ethical responsibility on the speaker, his dichotomy makes rhetoric amoral, neither good nor bad.

It is important to note the difference between duality and paradox. A duality seeks to split something in two—the person into body and soul, research methods into subjective and objective, the universe into heaven and earth, communication ethics into rhetor and rhetoric. A paradox says that two opposites are true of the same thing—depending on how one looks at it. Rhetoric is both good and bad—at the same time. When a philosopher uses rhetoric it is simultaneously good and bad.

There are nuanced differences here that are significant. Dualities simplify the complexity of life by dividing things into separate, component parts. Paradoxes speak to complexity. They demonstrate how many things may be true of one thing without a contradiction or negation. More importantly, dualities invite defensiveness and justification of the distinction one makes. Dualities always run the risk of being contradictions because they may pose a false duality that does not truly exist. In Dex's case, many of his rationalizations attempt to avoid contradiction by posing "crucial distinctions," the key defining quality that sets them apart. Syd challenges these distinctions as being artificial and self-serving. There can be no distinctions in a natural state because of the oneness that is all. Thus, duality and paradox differ significantly because dualities are based on the ability to correctly distinguish and categorize. They invite justification and defense of their interpretation because they are either right or wrong. Paradoxes, on the other hand, do not claim to be exclusive or correct. They are interpretations based upon viewing a facet of something. Paradoxes do not suggest right and wrong, but add layers of meaning that add richness to our understanding.

It is clear that duality is an appropriate strategy when one operates from a dualistic world-view, while paradox is appropriate for monism. These two strategies are therefore bounded, to some extent, by cultural assumptions regarding the nature of things. While a Taoist might use a duality, it would most likely be to show the folly of adopting a single perspective and claiming something belongs in one category or another. Similarly, a dualist might use paradox, but most likely to demonstrate the accuracy of one interpretation over another. The film reveals itself to be a Taoist tale because it uses paradox to critique duality; yet it does so evocatively, inducing the audience to interact with the film in order to render the insight

Fourth, and finally, the film serves as an example of the utility of using Taoist principles in rhetorical criticism. Taoism provides a unique vantage point for analysis, and the analysis, hopefully, yields potentially significant insights. If this claim rings true with other scholars, then Taoism may be utilized for further rhetorical criticism.

Notes

1. While I normally use the pinyin system for romanizing Chinese characters, I will use the Wade-Giles system because it is used in the film. I have not converted the terms of scholars, including myself, whose previous work uses pinyin and/or alternate spellings.
2. Lao tzu, Lao tsu, Lao tse, (Wade-Giles), Laozi, Lao-zi (pinyin system), are among the various spellings in English.
3. Chuang tzu, Chuang tsu, Chuang tse (Wade-Giles), Zhuangzi, Zhuang-zi (pinyin system), are among the various spellings in English.
4. All text cited "Chuang Tzu, trans. 1964," refers to Watson, 1964.
5. Also *Art of warfare*. Sun-tzu (Wade-Giles) and Sunzi, Sun-zi (pinyin system), are among the various spellings in English.

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