

# The Cocreating Environment

## A Nexus Between Classical Chinese and Current Nursing Philosophies

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**A**LTHOUGH NURSING THEORISTS have incorporated some concepts from Asian wisdom traditions (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism) into their works, the ways that these traditions might inform Western nursing philosophies, praxis, and ethics is underdeveloped in the professional literature. These differences have been more extensively explored in disciplines other than nursing (psychology, philosophy, and education).<sup>1–3</sup> In the scholarly nursing literature, areas of cross-cultural fertilization do exist. This literature has focused on explaining Chinese values<sup>4,5</sup> and exploring a Chinese understanding of the Western nursing metaparadigm concepts.<sup>6–8</sup> Chinese nursing scholars, many of whom have received graduate education in the West, have begun a dialogue in the professional literature that incorporates modifications to Western nursing theories reflecting their Asian contexts and traditions.

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The professional nursing (English language) literature about the Chinese concept of person, written by Chinese scholars, has focused on conveying the very basic concepts of Confucianism and Daoism. Framed as identifying Chinese values, several authors have given basic definitions of Confucian appropriateness (*yi*) within relationships, the Daoist goal of maintaining health through harmonious balancing (*jing*), and the contextual nature of all things (*wanwu*), common to both Confucian and Daoist perspectives.<sup>7–12</sup> This literature is needed and important in developing cross-cultural understandings; however, it does not go far enough in discussing the underlying philosophical assumptions of these traditions. It is only through analyzing how fundamentally the Chinese and Western philosophies differ that mutual understandings may be developed.

Wong and colleagues have broadened the cross-cultural discourse by exploring the Chinese understanding of concepts central to nursing (ie, caring, holism)<sup>7,8</sup> and describing a Chinese definition of nursing.<sup>12,13</sup> Pang and colleagues<sup>13</sup> interviewed 254 nurses in China to determine how they would describe nursing (*buli*). Themes found were focused on the dynamic nature of all things (*wanwu*) and optimizing actions within the act of nursing (*buli*). These are worthy first steps in drawing distinctions and finding common ground, but they are only first steps.

Over the past 100 years, a variety of social and cultural circumstances have led nursing

scholars in North America, Great Britain, and Australia to predominate within the international development of nursing theory and philosophy. As a result, most professional publishing (journals and textbooks) and conferences use the English language. This has led to an abundance of conceptual thinking in nursing, being framed by Western philosophy, particularly the philosophy of science. International students seek graduate nursing education in North American universities, to assist in their country's development of nursing; this continues the hegemony of Western nursing theories and philosophies. The time has passed, when nurses, along with other professionals, could work within the global community and maintain a dominant Western worldview.<sup>14</sup>

The hegemony of Western conceptual understandings about the nature and goals of nursing practice is evidenced by the extent to which the global discourse is framed in these ethnocentric conceptual understandings. Although areas of congruence exist between the Chinese and Western conceptions of the nature of nursing, a fundamental dissonance resonates between the 2 because of very different epistemological, ontological, and ethical perspectives. Understanding these differences is essential to a meaningful nonethnocentric dialogue within our discipline and profession.

The purpose of this article is to briefly describe the Daoist and Confucian philosophies, which permeate Chinese culture, and to compare and contrast these perspectives with Western nursing thinking in the unitary-transformative paradigm. My thesis is that a nexus or convergence of conceptualizations occurs between these 2 very different perspectives in their mutual understanding of the primacy of a cocreative environment. To set the stage for this discussion, an overview of the development of conceptual thinking in nursing is presented, followed by a comparative analysis of ways the environment, the self, and the relationship between the 2 are understood from each philosophical tradition.

## BACKGROUND

The development of philosophy within nursing has been slow but continuous. As a relatively new scholarly discipline, just 50 years old—a mere beginning when compared with the discipline of philosophy—nursing has struggled conceptually to find language and foundational assumptions that encompass all that nurses do and are. The earliest theorists, including Florence Nightingale, identified the main concerns of nurses to be the person, the environment, and the relationship between them. Subsequently, these concepts, along with caring and the act of nursing, have been formalized into the metaparadigm concepts of the discipline.

The taxonomy of paradigmatic perspectives suggested by Newman et al,<sup>15</sup> frames this comparative discussion. These authors conceptualized 3 categories with paired terms (ie, particulate-determinist, integrative-interactive, and unitary-transformative). The first term used represents the operative paradigmatic understanding of phenomena; the second word is the process used to create knowledge within the paradigm. Initially, nursing theorists based their work on the positivist perspective (particulate-deterministic paradigm) common to the Western medical model. It is a paradigm reflecting traditional Western philosophies (ie, philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes) and Newtonian physics, which are characterized by duality (ie, separation of mind and body, categorizing and separating phenomena into parts) and causal deterministic relationships.<sup>16</sup> Nursing scholars using this perspective focus on identifying and understanding parts (particulates) of the phenomena they study, and not a contextualized phenomenological whole. Causal (deterministic) explanations are considered the building blocks of knowledge and the determinant of truth.<sup>16</sup> Knowledge created by determining causal explanations is preferred over other types of knowledge in this worldview. Although most basic sciences have moved beyond this paradigm, it was

their traditional perspective for the 19th century and a major portion of the 20th century.

Striving for legitimacy, particularly from our medical colleagues, most nursing theorists and scholars of the 1960s to 1990s attempted to define nursing in this compartmentalized linear language, also used in the medical literature. Although this language and structure had a comfortable familiarity, as most nurses had spent the majority of their education in basic science courses, this conceptual perspective did not adequately reflect the contextual and temporal reality of nursing praxis. It created gaps between the experience of nursing practice and the conceptualizations about the experience of nursing practice.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, this discordance has continued to be an issue for many within the field, who have been educated within the positivist (particulate-deterministic) and/or postpositivist (integrative-interactive) paradigms.<sup>15</sup>

The second paradigmatic category, the interactive-integrative, is postpositivist (post-modern) perspectives adapted from the social and physical sciences. Systems theory, which has been widely used in nursing, falls into this category. The interactive-integrative paradigmatic approach is the most frequently observed paradigm in nursing research, because it focuses on interactions within a social context consisting of interactive phenomena, which more accurately reflects the contextualized environment, particulate-deterministic paradigm, nurses work within. However, this paradigm continues to incorporate the notion of duality by separating parts of the whole context, separately focusing on examining the relationships among the parts and the resultant interactions. For example, a human body is viewed as a whole but the mind and body can be studied separately. The mind and body affect each other and are parts of the whole, while remaining distinctly different entities. This conception continues the Cartesian mind-body duality, which is incongruent with Asian perspectives that emphasize an indivisible phenomenological holism.

The unitary-transformative paradigm is the third and final paradigm in this taxonomy. The theorists working within this paradigm have developed bodies of work that can best be called philosophies of nursing praxis and research. Dualistic thinking and relating are not relevant to this worldview.<sup>18</sup> In the mid-1980s, several seminal works in nursing grounded in existential (Heideggerian) phenomenological and deconstructionist (ie, Derrida) perspectives highlighted the complex, contextual, and cocreative nature of nursing praxis. The most widely known theorists working within these traditions are Benner<sup>19</sup> and Parse.<sup>20</sup> Other nursing theorists informed by recent paradigm shifts within the physical (ie, relativity, quantum theory, and Chaos theory) and social sciences (constructivism and naturalistic inquiry) elaborated the transformative and irreducibly interrelated nature of nursing praxis for both the client and the nurse.<sup>17,20-22</sup> The body of nursing philosophical and theoretical work that comes out of these conceptual shifts occurring in the 20th century has been termed the unitary-transformative paradigm in the professional literature.<sup>15,18</sup> The unitary-transformative perspective is not yet a mainstream thinking in nursing. However, it has resonated with many Asian nurses, who have used these conceptual approaches in their graduate education and to frame their research,<sup>7,9,10,23</sup> suggesting the possible congruencies between this nursing paradigm and classical Chinese philosophy, which still informs current Chinese cultural norms and understandings. Both similarities and profound differences occur when comparing these 2 philosophies.

## COMPARIVE ANALYSIS

The wisdom of classical Chinese philosophy (ie, Daoism and Confucianism) offers insights into the nature of context, the person, and personal relationships directly relevant for practicing nurses and nurse educators internationally. To begin a dialogue

about these insights and their usefulness for current nursing philosophy and praxis, 3 concepts commonly addressed with the nursing literature holism, the nature of the self, and the nature of personal relationships within a holistic context are discussed from the classical Chinese philosophical perspective. In choosing to compare and contrast the classical Chinese philosophy with the unitary-transformative nursing perspective related to these 3 themes, it is hoped that a deeper mutual and meaningful understanding will be possible that may lead to continued dialogue.

### The holistic nature of the environment

A holistic worldview of the environment encompassing one's context socially, culturally, and environmentally, is foundational within both classical Chinese philosophy and the unitary-transformative paradigm in nursing. Drawing on a variety of 20th century conceptual perspectives ranging from existential phenomenology to chaos theory, nursing theorists working within the unitary-transformative paradigm have defined *holism* as unity. Although theorists define holism within their own conceptual scheme, their definitions share the underlying assumption that the world in which one lives can not be broken down or separated into parts, rather the interconnectedness of all things is fundamental and instrumental in understanding the self and others. All theorists working in this paradigm view change as an ongoing and dynamic process. The transitions that occur over time are seen as a normal and expected course of things. The inherent ever-present nature of change is incorporated into their theoretical assumptions. These assumptions are congruent with the classical Chinese perspective.

According to Newman et al, within the unitary-transformative paradigm, "a phenomenon is viewed as a unitary, self-organizing field embedded in a larger self-organizing field. It is identified by pattern and by interaction with the larger whole."<sup>15</sup>(p4) The use of the term "self-organizing" within this definition implies a telos not evident

in the classical Chinese perspective. Assumptions fundamental to the Abrahamic traditions can be found in most theories of nursing theorists/philosophers working in the unitary-transformative paradigm. These underlying assumptions are not found in classic Chinese traditions, and they include notions of a transcendent God and a personal soul, which have a relationship commonly termed "the one-behind-the-many."<sup>24</sup> Although this nursing paradigm is not centered on the causally determined and dualistically compartmentalized perspective, as the other 2 nursing paradigms, it is not completely free of Western transcendent notions of the one-behind-the-many, which are common to Abrahamic traditions and the cultures in which they predominate. These distinctions are elaborated in greater detail in subsequent sections.

Within classical Chinese perspectives, the conceptualization of holism is process oriented with a correlative continuity among all things (*wanwu*). This correlative nature refers to the inherent mutual relationality occurring in any particular context and the assumption that multiple points of view coexist at all times. It is not a view that privileges the truth of the one-behind-the-many, rather it is a relational truth of "the-one-among-the-many."<sup>24</sup> Understanding this distinction is fundamental to understanding why Westerners frequently misunderstand the Chinese conceptions of truth, ethics, and contextualized relationships.<sup>2,14,25,26</sup> Another way to describe a correlative continuity among all things (*wanwu*), is to use the familiar Daoist depiction of yin and yang as circle with black and white elements, which illustrates how apparent opposites enable each other to exist and are complementary aspects of a holistic process.<sup>25,26</sup>

The Chinese conception of a contextualized environment has been termed a *focus-field* distinction by Ames and Hall.<sup>25</sup> The *field* refers to the totality of the particular context and the *focus* refers to that part of the field one is attending to at any point in time, which may change at any time. Change is understood

to be a constant. Holism is inherent within the focus/field, as parts can not be separated out, highlighting the plurality of vantage points within the perceptual horizon and the infinite possibilities inherent within it. Multiple valid vantage points exist within the field; it is a pluralistic approach that does not privilege one view over others (ie, the-one-behind-the-many).<sup>25,26</sup> The description of a contextualized environment as a focus/field is not unique to the Chinese perspective; it has also been described in the works by phenomenologist, existentialist, and pragmatist. Perhaps this accounts for the similarities found between the unitary-transformative and the classical Chinese philosophical perspectives related to the contextualized environment.

Other similarities found between the classical Chinese and unitary-transformative nursing perspectives, center around their mutual emphasis on the inherent nature of change. For example, Parse uses a specific language of gerund pairs (eg, connecting-separating, enabling-limiting) within her philosophy/theory to denote the dynamic and changing nature of all things.<sup>20</sup> Newman views change as continual and moving toward ever higher levels of growth.<sup>17</sup> Change is assumed.

These similarities have provided enough mutually understood ground for collaborative research and teaching to occur internationally; however, the similarities may also blind international colleagues to the fundamental differences that remain between these 2 perspectives.<sup>2,14,17</sup> Mutual understanding is necessary to have a dialogue, the pitfalls come when one is not attentive to and aware of the range of possible misunderstandings. Transcendent notions are so deeply embedded in Western culture and so deeply not present in classic Chinese traditions that they remain unseen too often within both cultures.<sup>14</sup>

### The nature of the self

These 2 ecological perspectives differ on how the self is situated in relation to the holistic context or focus/field. The unitary-transformative nursing paradigm comes out

of the Western Abrahamic traditions, which are substantive and essentialistic in nature.<sup>26</sup> "There is perception of the universal in the particular, which is a concrete manifestation of the universal. The particular becomes symbolic of the universal."<sup>15(p48)</sup> Self-determination and individualistic goal setting remain; agency has priority over situation. The self is viewed as substantive, being with a set persona that grows and develops within a specific context. Although interdependency and cocreativity enable transformations to occur through intimate connections with the environment that are assumptions setting this paradigm apart from others in nursing, the understanding of the self remains fundamentally defined by individualism. "Wholeness is the bedrock of our reality. We have been, are and will be whole in our being and relationships with others."<sup>27(p228)</sup>

Within the Chinese tradition there is no self (whole in our being), independent of the relationships constituting one's life. The classical Chinese view of self is neither substantive nor essentialistic.<sup>25(p20)</sup> The self is a "dynamic pattern of personal, social and natural relationships."<sup>24(p39)</sup> The various roles (daughter, mother, and employee) define the self and the interactions most appropriate within that relational context as described in the Confucian Analects.

The Master said:

In serving your father and mother, remonstrate with them gently. On seeing that they do not heed your suggestions, remain respectful and do not act contrary. Although concerned, voice no resentment.<sup>28(p93)</sup>

The Master said:

As a younger brother and son, be filial (*xiao*) at home and deferential (*di*) in the community, be cautious in what you say and then make good on your word (*xin*); love the multitude broadly and be intimate with those who are authoritative in their conduct (*ren*).<sup>28(p72)</sup>

No specific single individual with a set persona is seen in this worldview rather a relational self whose responsibility is to maintain appropriate relationships with others and

within specific contextual environments so that particular circumstances have optimal harmony (*he*) by creating balance. There is a priority of situation over agency (*de*) in this tradition<sup>25(p58)</sup> and a lack of ontological knowing (*wuzhi*).<sup>24(p40)</sup> In other words, “a human being is not something we are: it is something that we do and become.”<sup>25(p49)</sup> The Chinese self is relational not essentialistic, as is the Western notion of self.<sup>25(p24)</sup> The Chinese notion of self is constituted by roles and inherent relationships; there is no individualistic notion of self that is separated from contextualized particularities.

On a continuum with the Western conception of the rugged individualist at one end and classical Chinese notion of the relational self anchoring the other, the self defined by the unitary-transformative nursing paradigm would be at least midway and perhaps closer to the classical Chinese perspective. The definitions of self found within the unitary-transformative perspective acknowledge the interdependent mutual cocreation of relationships, coming closer to the Chinese relational self than other philosophical perspectives, but retaining the individualistic notion of self apart from the environmental context. These areas of conceptual congruence suggest the possibility of exploring mutual commonalities and meaningful dialogue. The differences between the classical Chinese and unitary-transformative nursing perspective are key to understanding the mutual gap in understanding that may exist between these worldviews. Although originating from different philosophical and cultural traditions, the primacy of relationships in both paradigms is a mutual commonality (ie, nexus) where a meaningful cross-fertilization might occur if accompanied by mutual respect of differences.

### **The nature of person-environment relationship**

Conceptualizations of the nature of the person in their environment are similar between the 2 paradigms, yet, the underlying

assumptions are fundamentally different. This situation presents opportunities, as well as challenges, that may not be readily apparent because of the tacit understandings involved. These subtleties may affect the dialogue and the nature of nursing praxis. The unitary-transformative and classical Chinese philosophical understandings of this relationship are discussed and compared.

### ***The unitary-transformative perspective***

Within the unitary-transformative paradigm, personal relationships are dynamic mutual interactions that are context dependent within the unitary-transformative nursing paradigm.<sup>17,20</sup> Context matters, the environment affects the person and the person affects the environment. A mutual flow exists that is ever-changing and requires awareness of this change if a nurse is to be effective.

*Pattern*, the dynamic relatedness among all things (*wanwu*), is viewed as defining and refining element of the whole, revealing that which is meaningful.<sup>29</sup> An interpenetration of specific fields creates the diversity within the unified field.<sup>15(p4)</sup> The nurse's role is to develop an understanding of the client-environment pattern (field) through interactions and then to cocreate a healing unified field with the client. Scholars working in this paradigm have differing perspectives on the mutual process of dynamic relatedness among all things (*wanwu*). A brief overview of the range in conceptual diversity follows.

Margaret Newman has termed this transformative process of mutual and creative unfolding as expanding consciousness.<sup>30</sup> She has used the self-organizing–disorganization–reorganization process elaborated in Chaos theory to inform her thinking on the ever-transforming nature of all things (*wanwu*). “Understanding the individuality of rhythm and timing in relationship is important in establishing the relevancy and effectiveness of nursing practice.”<sup>29(p229)</sup> Transformation only occurs in a positive direction. She has diagrammed this process as an upwardly swirling continuous circle.

Parse<sup>20</sup> describes the environment as contextual, dynamic, and cocreated. She views the human project as a continuum of human becoming facilitated by dynamic relatedness with the environment. "Human becoming is a unitary phenomenon that refers to the human's co-creation of rhythmical patterns of relating in mutual process with the universe."<sup>20(p31)</sup> Her work relies heavily on the existential works of 20th century European philosophers and the American pragmatist, John Dewey. Her work is grounded in the reality of experiences with the world and emphasizes the processional nature of all things.

Jean Watson's continued the development of the philosophy of caring in nursing, which is holistic and dynamically situated contextually, has led her to view caring as the moral imperative organizing self and the environment.<sup>22</sup> Caring actions during all interactions are fundamental to her perspective, which has a strong metaphysical component. "We are spirit made whole; non-manifest to manifest field, connected to and belonging to the infinity of cosmos and the universe, before separating as individuals and other entities."<sup>22(p111)</sup>

Each of these philosophies/theories recognizes the centrality of personal relationships within the environment, as does the classical Chinese perspective. It is through the active participation of individuals that relationships are facilitated and outcomes may be influenced. Recognition of the equal importance of multiple viewpoints within any context (ie, plurality) is another commonality. However, differences exist. The classical Chinese perspectives are pluralistic in nature, recognizing that the self is among the many without any conception of the monotheism of Western transcendental metaphysics.<sup>25(p32–33)</sup> Although deeply spiritual in nature, classical Chinese wisdom traditions do not contain any conceptions of a God that transcends human existence, as do the Abrahamic traditions.<sup>26</sup> Many the works done from the unitary-transformative perspective maintain an assumption of the transcended deity, rooted in

Abrahamic traditions. For example, Watson grounds her theory on work by the Talmud ethicist, Levinas<sup>22</sup>; Parse formulates her ontological base within the Abrahamic tradition.<sup>20</sup> Although Newman specifically states it is not her intention to incorporate a particular spiritual orientation in her work, she acknowledges her work is congruent with many of the religious traditions of the world.<sup>17(p94)</sup>

### *The Chinese perspective*

The goal of the Confucian tradition is to become an authoritative person (*ren*), which encompasses all personal attributes (cognitive, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual). Authoritative in this context does not imply any sense of authority, rather a wisdom developed intentionally. The authoritative person is one who has developed a deep understanding (*zhi*) of context and uses this wisdom to grow (*sheng*) appropriate (*yi*) noncoercive relationships (*wuwei*) with others.<sup>25(pp47–51)</sup> This growth process or way of becoming human is an aesthetic project, qualitative in nature, and particular by necessity, because the nature of personal relationships is always contextual. Appropriateness (*yi*) is always dependent on the contextual particulars; it is a relational not relativistic perspective.

Within the Daoist focus/field understanding of context human becoming is a cocreative process aimed at optimizing relationships with all things (*dao*) at any point in time.<sup>24(p16)</sup> The *dao* is "a way of becoming consummately and authoritatively human."<sup>26(p46)</sup> This perspective values the "insistent" particularity within each context (*de*) while requiring attention to both the focus and field—"the inseparability of the one and the many in continuity and multiplicity" (*Tang Junyi*).<sup>24(p33)</sup> This particularity provides the possibility of mutual growth through "making the most of one's ingredients" using cocreative processes.<sup>24</sup> "It is the person who is able to broaden the way, not the way that broadens the person."<sup>28(p190)</sup> Mutual cocreation of a harmonious balance (*jing*) with all things (*wanwu*) is possible

through optimizing within in any context. This interactive and correlative perspective on personal relationship is also inherently transformative. Each interaction transforms those participating to some extent. It is the Daoist goal to transform all within the context in such a way that outcomes are optimized for each and for all at the same time.

## CONCLUSION

By comparing and contrasting classic Chinese perspectives of person, environment, and the relationship between the two with the unitary-transformative nursing paradigm, areas of commonality have been highlighted. These commonalities create a nexus that needs further exploration and conceptual development. Within the described

nexus, nursing scholars working from each of the 2 philosophical traditions can dialogue in ways that have common meanings. It is easy to assume, when some areas of common meanings exist, that the more tacit understandings supporting these common meanings are mutually understood. Too often, this is not the case, misunderstandings occur because the deeper more fundamental philosophical orientations are not evident. Although this nexus opens opportunities for greater mutual understanding, it can not be overstated that fundamental epistemological, ontological, and ethical differences also exist within the 2 traditions. This article was a beginning effort to explore some of the fundamental distinctions that underlie these different philosophical orientations, which on the surface may seem to have so much in common.

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			1. Complete and file copy of this form with your postmaster annually on or before October 1. Keep a copy of the completed form for your records.			
			2. In cases where the stockholder or security holder is a trustee, include in items 10 and 11 the name of the person or corporation for whom the trustee is acting. Also include the names and addresses of individuals who are stockholders who own or hold 1 percent or more of the total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities of the publishing corporation in item 11. If none, check the box. Use blank sheets if more space is required.			
			3. Be sure to furnish all circulation information called for in item 15. Free circulation must be shown in items 15d, e, f.			
			4. Item 15b, Copies Not Distributed, must include (1) newspaper copies originally stated on Form 3541, and returned to the publisher (2) estimated returns from news agents, and (3) copies for office use, libraries, schools, and all other copies not distributed.			
			5. If the publication had Periodicals authorization as general or requester publication, this Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation must be published. It must be printed in any issue in October or, if the publication is not published during October, the first issue printed after October.			
			6. In item 16, indicate the date of the issue in which this Statement of Ownership will be published.			
			7. Item 17 must be signed.			
12. Tax Status (For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at nonprofit rates) (Check one)			Failure to file or publish a statement of Ownership may lead to suspension of Periodicals authorization			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months			PS Form 3526, September 1998 (Reverse)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months (Publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement)						