

## Article

# A Taoist Study of Magic in *The Earthsea Cycle*

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**Abstract:** *The Earthsea Cycle* by Ursula K. Le Guin is a fantasy work in Western literature that shines with ostentatiously idiosyncratic sparks of Taoist philosophies. Resorting to Taoism (also translated as Daoism) and its representative work *Tao Te Ching*, this article aims at exploring the Earthsea magic, a ubiquitous motif in fantasy, with Taoist thoughts and theories including the law of relativity, harmonious dialectics, and equilibrium. This article reconstructs the magical Earthsea world within a Taoist framework and reveals the Taoist connotations of magic. Finally, this article concludes that, radically distinct from its traditional image, magic in Earthsea serves to heal the physical, mental, and spiritual wound of separation; set up harmony of the opposites in binaries; and preserve the delicate equilibrium insusceptible to the ravages of time. Magic in *The Earthsea Cycle* works miracles in a Taoist manner.

**Keywords:** *The Earthsea Cycle*; Taoism; Ursula K. Le Guin; magic; harmonious dialectics



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## 1. Introduction

Deriving “from the Greek term magoi” but remaining as a fluid construct (Gilbert et al. 2016), magic and magical practices, which permeated the worldly life of men dating back to ancient Greece and Rome, readily accessible to be “employed for the most mundane ends” (Bailey 2007, p. 10), have seemingly been the subjects of the perpetual infatuation of men ever since. Magic being a vital dimension of fantasy, Ursula K. Le Guin, who states that she has been a Taoist ever since she learned what the refreshing and empowering idea was (Peterson 2016), does not hesitate to adopt it with a hue of Taoist thoughts. Therefore, similar to Tao, magic and nature in *The Earthsea Cycle* is as pristine and infinite as time itself. Before the age of Enlightenment, magic, thinly veiled with a religious aura, was respected and feared by human beings far more than any type of natural disaster, wild animal, or adversary army from an adjacent country. In contemporary society, even with the rapid development of science, the sophisticated maturity of technology, and the ubiquitous prevalence of skepticism, people’s passion for and curiosity about magic in no sense decreased or faded.

A corresponding Taoist interpretation is called for to probe into such a motley yet representative collection of East Asian philosophies in the Earthsea magic. In *The Earthsea Cycle*, magic is drastically different from its stereotypes, which describe it as a fascinating tool with dazzling spells to destroy the enemy or overcome the evil. On the contrary, magic plays an indispensable and fundamental role in sustaining the normal function of nature in the Earthsea world, for it is not only the starting point of the protagonists’ adventurous journeys of self-revelation and the essential connection between human beings and nature, but also the most efficient and effective tool to end the reign of dark power.

In *The Earthsea Cycle*, it is not unexpected that magic encompasses the common elements of casting a spell, transforming an object, and creating natural forces. However, Earthsea magic extends beyond these conventional practices and builds its essence upon Taoist philosophy. The magical spell of Earthsea is Old Speech, the true name of all things. Apart from mastering the aforementioned magical tricks, Earthsea magic lays

tremendous emphasis on the moral rules and ethical boundaries that govern its own application. Therefore, magic essentially compels all wizards to think about the cause–effect relationship in magic and the balanced operation of the world before any action is taken. That is why the Master Hand tells Ged that “you must not change one thing, one pebble, one grain of sand, until you know what good and evil will follow on the act” (Le Guin 2012, p. 51). A wizard’s power of changing and summoning through magic should be wielded with prudence as it has a bearing on all existence, either direct or indirect, in a way reminiscent to the Taoist concept of harmony and equilibrium.

Basing itself on Le Guin’s depiction of magic and interpretation of Taoist philosophies related to nature in her stories, this article refers to magic as the starting point and analyzes magic as the fundamental pillar and solid foundation for constructing the Earthsea world with harmonious dialectics of positive and negative elements in the Taoist structure. Moreover, this article also demonstrates how, by applying magic from the Taoist perspective, Le Guin succeeds in maintaining and eventually transcending equilibrium in the Earthsea world.

To understand the essence of magic in Earthsea, a reconstruction of the magical Earthsea will lay a thought-provocative foundation, and the salient Taoist attributes of the magical Earthsea world must first be analyzed. According to Taoism, “Tao is without beginning, without end. The material things are born and die, and no credit is taken for their development. Emptiness and fullness alternate, and their relations are not fixed” (Laotse 2012, chp. 40 “The Principle of Reversion,” p. 561). Chuangtse holds the view that death is the biggest inevitable and essential issue open to change in life, which sheds light on the homogeneity between them. The life without the changing element injected by the occurrence of death is but dead stillness with no rays of hope. In addition, Chuangtse also attaches tremendous importance to the circulating nature of the relationship between life and death so that “the succession of growth and decay, of increase and diminution, goes in a cycle, each end becoming a new beginning” (Lin 2012, p. 563). Life and death of all things in the universe are inevitable, since they function in a way similar to that of the eternity of the alternation between night and day that is in accordance with nature’s law.

In the Earthsea world, the view regarding life and death as two opposite ends of the same thing, and the same cycle is drawn from statements about “the theory of cycles and universal reversion to opposites” (Laotse 2012, chp. 2 “The Rise of Relative Opposites,” p. 49). To be more exact, according to Taoism, such relationships between the two opposite ends do not exist simply in those of life and death but in all other things as well. Thus, “one might as well talk of the existence of Heaven without that of Earth, or of the negative principle without the positive, which is clearly impossible” (Lin 2012, p. 57). The existence itself asks for the union of two opposite ends or elements to achieve the wholeness, regardless of it being life and death, the world and nether, light and dark, or any other pairs of opposite elements that can be found in the infinite universe. Accordingly, in *Wizard of Earthsea*, learning magic does not lead Ged to become a potent hero with glorious deeds of defeating the unspeakable and despicable evil lord. Contrastingly, the dark shadow Ged hunts is actually the other half of himself that completes Ged as a whole person. Thus, a fresh understanding of the magical Earthsea world can be traced back to the Taoist philosophy.

Magic, which is not an unfamiliar element in different literary works of the fantasy genre, is given a fresh definition in *The Earthsea Cycle* in Taoist terms distinct from the ones in other magic-grounded worlds. A research into both the recorded history of literature and social developments demonstrates that magic, or witchcraft and sorcery in other contextual situations, has been regarded as a superstitious art performed serving a specific purpose especially in the political and religious power-struggle hierarchy. For instance, the participants in Boxer Rebellion in 20th-century China believed in magical entities that could turn a Chinese person Achilleian (Zhao 2013), while in modern South Africa, magic is employed to cast a curse upon the victim, near whose house a concoction of graveyard earth and a magical potion is placed (Ashforth 2005, pp. 139–41). There seems to be “something vaguely disreputable and distasteful about their acts” (Bailey 2007, p. 10). In *The Earthsea*

*Cycle*, however, Le Guin robs magic of its feature as an agent of power and desire. Instead, magic is painted with philosophical serenity, thus becoming the indispensable connection between human beings and all other existences, which are closely entwined with each other to delicately sustain the normal operation of the world in equilibrium.

In *The Earthsea Cycle*, Le Guin's depiction of magic is heavily influenced by Taoist philosophy, which holds the view that the seemingly paradoxical, opposite yet compatible pairing relationship can be found in all things. More specifically, what is beyond the superficial opposite relationship among all things is how the pair of two opposite elements are inevitably interdependent and mutually transformable at the same time. In Le Guin's *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching—A Book About The Way And The Power Of The Way*, her rendition of the original text, expressions such as "Being and nothing; Arise together" (Le Guin 1998, chp. 2 "Soul food," p. 4) can be found as an effective indication of the transformation of the opposite and circular motion view in Taoism. All things in the universe are created by and originate from Tao, which is a complete whole that breeds and cultivates existence in a relative and dialectical manner.

Accordingly, in the Earthsea world, magic is not acquired by the mages or wizards to bring catastrophic endings to pure evil, nor is it used to endow the pure and innocence with infinite physical indulgence or spiritual fulfillment, for such things as pure evil or pure innocence can by no means be found in the Earthsea world. The eclectic combination of the two ends in a binary relationship urges the Earthsea magic to find a new place. Acquiring Earthsea magic involves a vital dimension of Taoist thoughts about life and death. In the Earthsea world, magic is never fully reduced to a tool of life creation or death harbinger. Instead, it acts to maintain the natural circulation of life and death. Consequently, in a world in accordance with the law of the opposites and relatives, the seemingly good and evil are but the opposite sides of a whole, while magic serves as the meeting point between them.

## 2. Magic's Healing Power and Its Taoist Connotations

In *The Earthsea Cycle*, magic heals the wound of separation by leading people to regard the crucial issue and theme about life and death as one based on their essence, instead of two completely opposite extremes that contradict each other. In the Earthsea world, Le Guin elaborates on the relationship between living and death as two sides of life that guarantee its wholeness. More specifically, in *The Earthsea Cycle*, people's desires and attempts to achieve immortality do little except for showing men's disobedience and violation of nature's law by stopping at nothing to intercept, end, and even displace the cycle of life and death. Such attempts, ironically, lead only to more suffering, agonies, and deaths, because such desperate attempts result in the eradication of the origin of existence, the invalidation of peace agreements, and the escalation of conflicts between different ethnicity or species, including human beings and dragons. On the contrary, magic teaches the men in the Earthsea world that it is of vital importance to regard living and death as opposite ends of one thing and one circle, which is life. "Only in dying life" (Le Guin 2012, p. 1). Hence, life and death are merely the different sides of the same source. It is worth noting, however, that the circulation of life and death runs in contrast with the history of sectarian Taoism, whose pursuers "draw from the repository of Daoist alchemy" to cultivate a state of immortality through "rigorous self-training" and "strenuous fighting against monsters" (Ni 2020), as is demonstrated in some Chinese fantasy works.

In *The Earthsea Cycle*, Le Guin does not simply stop at redefining the relationship between life and death; she takes another step and further reveals the secret to existence as one that shows life absorbs death as an indispensable part, with death regenerating the dynamics and energies necessary for the conditions of rebirth. For instance, in *The Other Wind*, Tehanu said, "I think when I die, I can breathe back the breath that made me live. I can give back to the world all that I didn't do. All that I might have been and couldn't be" (Le Guin 2001, p. 286). Hence, it is evident that by dying and through death, a person completes the act of returning in that death takes away the unfulfilled possibilities

or unchosen choices from the specific individual and gives it back to the world. However invisible and intangible they might be, they are a real kind of returning whose authenticity and effectiveness leave no room for doubt or skepticism. Hence, in *The Earthsea Cycle*, magic leads people to abandon the dichotomy of the absolute good and the absolute evil and further regard life and death as the opposite ends in the same thing.

Against such a background, magic in the Earthsea world mends separation by re-assessing and reevaluating all things in a dialectical manner. Taoist philosophy believes that “there is nothing which is not this; there is nothing which is not that. What cannot be seen by that (the other person) can be known by myself. Hence I say, this emanates from that; that also derives from this. This is the theory of the interdependence of this and that (relativity of standards)” (Lin 2012, p. 51). The emblem of such relationships between two opposite ends like life and death can also be discovered in the essence of all other things in the universe. For example, the comparisons of the long and the short, the dynamic and the static, the full and the empty, the light and the dark can all be categorized in such harmonious combination of the positive and the negative, and the list goes on. In *The Earthsea Cycle*, with the acquirement of magic and the growth of the protagonists such as Ged, Tenar, Arren, Therru, and the development of the Archipelago, the combination of the positive and negative is gradually revealed and eventually becomes a unified cycle. The growth and maturity of all the protagonists illustrate how the relationship between life and death and all other things are the emblem of Tai Chi, the most important graphical representation of the view about relativity and cycle in Taoism. Therefore, the Taoist view of relativity and cycle is used to construct the image of all elements and things in the Earthsea world.

Moreover, magic in *The Earthsea Cycle* heals the wound of separation by demonstrating how interactions and bi-directional convertibility are established in such relationships. The implementation of magic relies heavily on the contact between two objects, which are of intricate connections (Tambiah 1991, p. 59). One example is that in *The Earthsea Cycle*, Le Guin uses one metaphorical magical object, the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, to embody the connotation of this concept. What is more, in *The Tombs of Atuan*, Ged and Tenar eventually succeed in bringing back and putting the two broken halves of the ring back together. The reunion of the fragmented ring also symbolizes the reestablishment of peace and order in the Earthsea world as well as Tenar’s new phase in life, which is filled with light, freedom, and happiness, thanks to the companionship and assistance offered by Ged. In consequence, magic, particularly the magical objects in *The Earthsea Cycle*, works wonders and mends separation by recognizing the view of circulation and reversion in Taoism.

Magic in *The Earthsea Cycle* heals the wound of separation following the pattern revealed in the diagram of Tai Chi as represented in Figure 1 below, which is painted heavily with metaphorical meanings of union and cycle between the positive and negative ends in things. More specifically, a thoughtful look at the diagram of Tai Chi leads people to observe how the white half and the black half are interconnected with each other and the line acting as the border and boundary is actually blurred and ambiguous. More importantly, the two halves are not only interconnected, but also in constant and dynamic interactions and conversions, which means that one half’s impact may be traced back to the most trivial fragment of the other half. Most interestingly, the two halves ultimately melt into one and emerge as one within the external cycle, both originating from “the One (of the universe)” (Lin 2012, p. 3). As a result, the profound and thought-provoking meanings indicated by Tai Chi serve as the guidance of magic’s healing power in the Earthsea world.

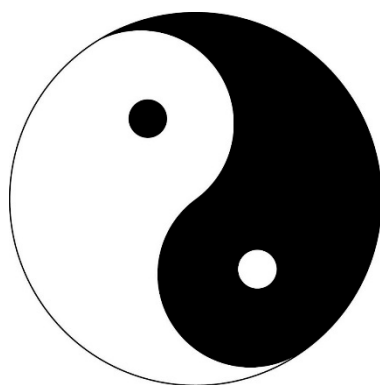


Figure 1. Represents “Tai Chi” (Tai Chi 2021).

In accordance, in *The Earthsea Cycle*, all the protagonists’ growths follow the pattern of Tai Chi in that they start from one point to venture out into the outside magical world accumulating knowledge and experience, yet eventually return to the same point as a new and whole being. After being released from the underground dark tomb with the help of Ged’s magic, Tenar starts her adventure in the outside world that brings her to a common housewife’s daily chores and worldly annoyances. Such precious experience should have been her starting point in life in the very first place. Thus, by following the philosophical and mysterious pattern in the diagram of Tai Chi, Le Guin uses magic as the medium to depict the protagonists’ explorations and growth, which tremendously emphasizes the importance of union and cycle, and consequently heals the wound of separation.

The element of magic in *The Earthsea Cycle* repeatedly leads the protagonists to adventures of rediscovering and healing that can be analyzed from both the macroscopic and microscopic perspectives just like the diagram of Tai Chi in Taoism. To be more specific, from the macroscopic perspective, as the emblem of Tao, the diagram of Tai Chi can be observed to constantly function in a still and static state, with all elements and components collaborating in harmony (Zhang and Ryden 2002, p. 179). In the Earthsea world, thus, from the macroscopic perspective, magic and other elements seem to be similarly still and static, reflecting the essence of all things and absorbing the energy of the universe in silence and tranquility. From the microscopic aspect, however, every element contributing to the wholeness of Tai Chi is characterized with constant changes and the subsequent uncertainties, which make it stay in an active and dynamic status. In the Earthsea world, thus, from the microscopic point of view, no characters, or magical objects, or even the nameless shadows, can be found remaining exactly the same from the beginning to the end, such as the underground altar in *The Tombs of Atuan*, which is also filled with elements of change and uncertainty that only increase its suffocating imprisonment. As a result, from the macroscopic and microscopic perspectives, the construction of the Earthsea world, similar to that of Tai Chi, is in a seemingly paradoxical silent and static state filled with change and uncertainty.

It is manifested that Le Guin interprets the common element of Fantasy in an uncommon way in *The Earthsea Cycle*, where magic is not the tool to defeat and conquer, but the method to heal the wounds of separation. In all the protagonists’ stories in the Earthsea world, magic guides them to see the world in a different way that regards pairs of things as the opposite sides of the same thing instead of two completely different or mutually exclusive elements. The healing power of magic in the Earthsea world roots itself in Taoist concepts such as laws of relativity. Moreover, the function of magic in the Earthsea world actually is the manifestation of Tai Chi, the Taoist symbol that delivers the authentic meaning of relativity and wholeness. Therefore, magic in *The Earthsea Cycle* teaches people to abandon their prejudice and bias because things that occur in pairs such as life and death originate from and depend on each other. Magic’s power to heal the wounds of separation originates from the Taoist philosophy of relativity and displays itself in the Earthsea world as one of the crucial elements in all the protagonists’ adventures there.



### 3. Taoist Harmonious Dialectics in Earthsea with Magic

In Western cultures, the dichotomy of good and evil and the black-and-white dualism are prevalent in people's ways of thinking and the subsequent cultural products. The incompatibility of black and white connotes the moral dichotomy of good and evil. The Bible depicts angels as dressed in white, and painters such as Rembrandt portrays a dark world penetrated by illuminating rays of divine light (Arnheim 1974, pp. 324–25). Most of the Western literary works of Fantasy are no exceptions. One example is that the young hero Harry Potter fights against the dark power Voldemort throughout seven books and eventually defeats him to restore peace in the world. *The Earthsea Cycle*, however, is different from other Western literary works of Fantasy in that magic there guides the people to consider all things in nature with harmonious dialectics instead of dichotomy. The philosophy of harmonious dialectics, an alternative to Western hierarchical epistemology that is rooted deeply in the dichotomy of good and evil, requires people to shy away from the absolute, definite, and subjective judgments on all perceptible and imperceptible things in the universe.

Magic in *The Earthsea Cycle* adopts the view of relativity to eradicate the boundaries setting things apart in the ideas of dichotomy. Magic guides people in the Earthsea world to hold the belief that all things, regardless of their characteristic being white or dark, dynamic or still, noisy or quiet, exist and function in a harmonious way (Daniels 2011, p. 260). Magic in the Earthsea world is actually Le Guin's interpretation of the Taoist concept concerning the interplay between Yin and Yang. On the one hand, the interplay of Yin and Yang is the cradle of great reversals and carries the cycle to guarantee the functioning balance of the current society. On the other hand, Yin and Yang put together the generalization of all the relativities in and among things. One example can be found in *Tombs of Atuan*, where Ged's magic physically rescues Tennar from the tombs of dark and death. Tennar's true spiritual rescue, however, does not happen until she discovers her true savior—herself, because neither dark nor death should be feared, fixed, or fled from. They consist of the other side of light and life, the beginning of light and life, and one of the vital links in the cycle. Magic leads the people in the Earthsea world to redefine the relationship between things such as life and death, light and dark, or good and evil. Accordingly, magic in the Earthsea world guides the people to reflect on things as a part of the whole instead of the separated and independent entities.

Magic in *The Earthsea cycle* is deeply rooted in harmonious dialectics because it leads the people to discover how the wholeness of all things in nature originates from their broken attribution. How magic in the Earthsea world enlightens the people to perceive and explore with harmonious dialectics echoes Laotse's belief in "weakness overcoming strength and gentleness overcoming rigidity" (Laotse 2012, chp. 78 "Nothing Weaker Than Water," p. 797). To present an instance, in *Tehanu*, Therru is the protagonist whose characterization demonstrates an image filled with dualities and dialectics. On the one hand, constantly suffering from the physical defects makes Therru a broken figure in others' eyes. On the other hand, her incredible inner power, such as the strength, perseverance, and tolerance, becomes the most convincing evidence of her true identity as an offspring of the dragon-human species. Moreover, Therru's birth as a Gontish woman in a foreign and remote place in the Earthsea world carries the great wizards' predictions to become a savior that will solve the crisis and restore equilibrium in the whole world. Therefore, magic draws people's attention to the power of brokenness and the origin of wholeness.

The significance of the attribute of being whole in all things is well demonstrated through the poem at the beginning of the readers' journey to this fantastic magical world. For instance, *The Earthsea Cycle* unfolds its magic by presenting a delicately written short poem, which introduces the concepts of harmonious dialectics in poetic expressions such as "only in silence the word, only in dark the light, only in dying life" (Le Guin 2012, p. 1). The profound and thought-provoking poem is titled *The Creation of Eà*, imitating the Taoist interpretation of the origin of all things. The interplay and interaction of the positive and negative forces break through the superficial impression as being polarized or even

contradictory, and form the harmony of mutual independence as well as complimentary relationships that lead to the ultimate reunification in the universe. The silence nourishes the seed of the word; the dark breeds the infancy of the light; death ignites the energy of life. Hence, the poem that lights up the path to the magical Earthsea world not only imitates the literary expressions in Taoism but also acknowledges the ancient wisdom in it.

Magic in *The Earthsea Cycle* lays tremendous emphasis on the power of those seemingly negative sides in all things and affirms the power of softness. The Taoist concept of opposite relationships remains a crucial impact on Le Guin throughout her life, and she interpreted Laotse' opinions about the power of the negative sides as the following sentences in the book *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching—A Book About The Way And The Power Of The Way*:

Be broken to be whole.  
Twist to be straight.  
Be empty to be full.  
Wear out to be renewed.  
Have little and gain much.  
Have much and get confused. (Le Guin 1998, chp. 16 "Returning to the root," p. 22)

The characterization and depiction of Therru in *Tehuna* are in accordance with her understandings about the related Taoist philosophies. To be more specific, the sentence "be broken to be whole" (Le Guin 1998, chp. 16 "Returning to the root", p. 22) is supported with details of Therru in *The Earthsea Cycle*: it is exactly Therru's broken body and physical defects that inspire her to step on the magical path leading to inner strength and spiritual completion, which, in turn, result in her transcendence beyond gender and species as the hybrid of men and dragons. Hence, the power of softness and other superficially negative elements are demonstrated in *The Earthsea Cycle*.

The power of brokenness is demonstrated by various protagonists and their growth assisted by magic in *The Earthsea Cycle*. As presented with details quoted from the original texts, the story of Therru in *Tehanu* efficiently delivers the message. Another example is Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, where Ged releases the dark shadow and the subsequent potential catastrophes that might be caused in the world. According to the well-acknowledged pattern in Western literary works of Fantasy, Ged is expected to fight against the dark shadow in a tight match and eventually destroy the dark power with a narrow win, sometimes at the cost of some of his close friends. Interestingly, in *The Earthsea Cycle*, few scenes can be found where Ged grasps the opportunity to directly face the dark shadow, let alone a thrilling fight between them. In contrast, the way for Ged to overcome the dark shadow is not to fight it but to recognize, accept, and embrace it. That is why at the end of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged becomes whole by embracing his other side—the dark shadow. Moreover, in another book of Earthsea, the sentence "the world was broken and made whole" (Le Guin 1972, p. 246) is delivered by Ged to show Le Guin's profound understanding of brokenness. Additionally, *The Other Wind* ends the story by presenting a world where all powers are converged and become one. As a result, the wounds in the broken and imbalanced Earthsea world are mended through convergence and wholeness of the individuals and entities.

Magic in *The Earthsea Cycle* establishes the harmonious balance between human beings and nature because magic is regarded as the force pervading the natural processes (Otto and Stausberg 2013, p. 17). In all Earthsea stories, the relativity between various pairs of elements and concepts such as appearance and spirit, ugliness and aesthetics, dragons and human beings are constantly emphasized throughout the protagonists' stories. Additionally, as a significant element, the transformation by magic from human beings to dragons is adopted by Le Guin to symbolize the gradual awakening and rising up of men. For instance, in *Tehanu*, with the help of magic, Therru manages to transform into a dragon during a process depicted heavily with metaphors and embedded meanings: flying to the sky and over the earth represents men's awakening from the dark to the enlightenment and spiritual awakening from the mundane world to the heaven. The transformation of Therru guides the readers to discover the power of female and, more

importantly, the reunion of men, all existences, and nature as they were at the beginning of time. In consequence, magic makes transformation possible and the reunion between men and nature something inevitable.

Magic becomes an efficient and effective method for the people in the Earthsea world to forgo their prejudices against the opposition of duality. For instance, magic helps Ged find his other self and achieve the completion; magic assists Therru in recognizing her inner self and transforming into a dragon; magic succeeds in uniting the people and the dragons with the shared purpose of restoring peace in the whole world. With the help of magic, the transcendence over the limits of time, space, physical strength, and perceptive capabilities is accomplished. Such transcendence leads people to regard all things equally as one, which is the essence of harmonious dialectics. Therefore, magic reunites the opposite elements to complete the circle of wholeness.

The magical power in the Earthsea world works magic by proposing all people to appeal to the immobile activity that emphasizes understanding, tolerance, and harmony. For instance, Le Guin renders the poetic lines in *Tao Te Ching* as the following. “That’s why the wise soul does without doing, teacher without talking” (Le Guin 1998, chp. 2 “Soul food,” pp. 4–5). The reason lies in the fact that “the things of this world exist, they are; you can’t refuse them” (Le Guin 1998, chp. 2 “Soul food,” pp. 4–5). The concepts that lay the foundation for Taoism are depicted with crystal clarity in the above lines. On the one hand, good and evil are intricately entwined with each other, which means no good can be done without the deeds of ill intentions. Hence, the people might become so meticulous and cautious about their actions and the subsequent changes that they eventually resort to non-actions as the ideal alternative. On the other hand, the wisdom of a sage teaches people the definite truth that no man exists as a lonely island in the universe. Instead, a delicate and intricate web connecting all life and non-life in the planet constantly draws people to respect and embrace all things with an invisible hand. In *The Earthsea Cycle*, such concepts are resonated against with a variety of details, such as people’s respect for the all things’ nature, the process of unlearning, the state of tranquility, and the journey going back to the “natural integrity of uncarved wood” (Laotse 2012, chp. 28 “Keeping to the Female,” p. 315), which, in Taoist terms, refers to “the utmost state of nature” (Zhang 2007), as it is believed that “the greatest carver does the least cutting” (Zhang 2007) so as to preserve it as it has been and will always be. In consequence, under the influence of magic in the Earthsea world, people learn to make a difference without taking actions.

It is obvious that as an indispensable element in *The Earthsea Cycle*, magic introduces the fundamental Taoist notion of harmonious dialectics, which differs drastically from its Western counterpart. Magic proposes a Taoist lifestyle among the Earthsea people who compliantly adopt the ideal role of an observer in the life to see and to hear. The reflection of the wholeness in all things opens people’s eyes to discover the power and energy in the seemingly negative forces and elements. Therefore, the enchanting power of magic in the Earthsea world never lies in its destructive nature or conquering essence. On the contrary, it is its attribute of harmonious dialectics and its power of reunification that succeed in bringing the broken pieces together while reconstructing a whole and sustainable magic world.

#### 4. Taoist Equilibrium in Earthsea with Magic

Magic plays an indispensable role in the establishment and restoration of equilibrium in nature of the Earthsea world. At the beginning of time, magic serves as the tool for men to explore the original and pure status of all things through the means of revealing the secrets embedded in their true names. With the comprehensive development in the Earthsea world, particularly the economic, social, and civil sphere, regional conflicts and wars break out, bringing agony and suffering to the tanned smiling faces. Magic surpasses its previous function and guides the people in *The Earthsea Cycle* to restore peace and equilibrium to this lovely land. The stories of Ged, the Archmage, and dragonlords attach tremendous importance to obtaining the ethics of using the magical power, which enables



the protagonists to accomplish the restoration of equilibrium in both their inner selves and the exterior world.

The connection between magic and equilibrium in *The Earthsea World* is one that must be elaborated on with its Taoist foundation, since the Taoist concept of equilibrium has long remained one of its paramount and influential core ideas. To be more specific, the Taoist notion of equilibrium is associated with modifiers, such as “integral,” “dialectical,” and “natural,” which equip people with a full picture while looking at life and the real world problems with the purposes of evaluation and assessment. As one of the strongest representations of the typical ancient Chinese wisdom, Taoist philosophy contains rich dialectical epistemology, sophisticated abstract thinking, and sheds light on the way of thinking. Eventually, Taoism with its emphasis on equilibrium took the lead among the philosophical schools and boasted a high reputation.

The interior connotations of equilibrium are deeply rooted in nature, and require inaction as the pragmatic method to approach its embodiment. On the one hand, equilibrium finds its manifestation in nature, where the positive elements and the negative forces achieve a harmonious reunification resulted from the mutual dependence. Tao, the essence and origin of the existence and universe, lays a solid foundation for equilibrium and all the other possibilities in this universe. On the other hand, inaction plays the role of guidance leading people to step on the discovery exploration for the realization of the invaluable equilibrium, which is to say that the Taoist comprehension of equilibrium avoids the interference or intervention in the natural function and growth of all things during the process of interactions. Therefore, equilibrium serves as a decisively significant pillar in the construction of the Taoist philosophical system by guiding and support the dialectical logical framework.

Equilibrium in the Taoist framework values the harmonious combination and sustainable coexistence of the opposite forces, which carry the visualization as You and Wu (Osgood 1973) in the *Tao Te Ching*. Wu, loosely translated in English as nothingness, ignites the discussions at the beginning of the Taoist masterpiece concerning the original state of existence, where the earth and the heaven are formless and abstract. On the other hand, You can be regarded as an inclusive interpretation as all existences in the universe, regardless of the forms or shapes. Followed by three pairs of opposite elements including “the name that can be given and absolute name, the nameless and the named, passionless and passion” (Laotse 2012, chp. 1 “On the Absolute Tao,” p. 33), You and Wu set the extreme ends of such dialectical relations. Thus, it is the essentially contradictory yet mutually dependent elements following the model of You and Wu that sustain the status of equilibrium.

Equilibrium guides people to approach the origin of all things as one, however drastically different they are. For instance, according to Taoism, “the things of this world come from Being, and Being (comes) from nonbeing” (Laotse 2012, chp. 40 “The Principle of Reversion,” p. 561). Despite their different names, You and Wu can both trace their roots back to Tao with Wu being Tao’s essence and You the function. Moreover, “Being and nonbeing are interdependent in growth” (Laotse 2012, chp. 2 “The Rise of Relative Opposites,” p. 47). The harmonious union of Wu and You as well as other opposite forces in the universe witnesses the dynamic process, in the duration of which Tao undergoes the transformation from an abstract concept into a tangible perceptible matter. In short, as the representative of the opposite equivalences, You and Wu, offer little space for contrasts, contradictions, or conflicts. They are, instead, the two opposite yet complementary and compatible sides of the same continuous process. Characterized with mutual dependence and bi-directional transformation, the elements similar to You and Wu construct the pillar for equilibrium.

In *The Earthsea Cycle*, as an imitation of the concepts in relation to You and Wu in the Taoist equilibrium, magic reveals the myth of how the relative and opposite concepts lay a solid foundation for the establishment of the fascinating Earthsea world. Various examples can be found in the stories to support this intricate correlation, particularly the poetic lines about the origin of magic and existence in *Tehanu*, which read “the making

from the unmaking, the ending from the beginning, who shall know surely?" (Le Guin 1990, p. 222). Reflecting the Taoist ideas in both the message and the ways of delivery, these poetic lines recreate the scene when the universe gradually develops into what it is like today and how everything takes shape. Unmaking mimics the Taoist belief in an originally chaotic and formless state, while making refers to an ordered and organized world functioning on the basis of names. Unmaking embodies infinite possibilities, from which making originates. In addition, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the instructions of the great mages that "to light a candle is to cast a shadow" (Le Guin 2012, p. 51) embodies how the opposite forces and elements are intricately entwined with each other. Therefore, the Taoist equilibrium serves as the pillar in the construction of the Earthsea world.

As suggested by negative dialectics, with the embodiment of Wu in Taoism, the negative forces and elements constitute a paramount concept supporting equilibrium. The philosophical method in Taoism that proves the positive in virtue of the negative is known as negative dialectics, which "indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived" (Adorno 1990, p. 5). More specifically, interacting with their opposite counterparts, Wu carries the definition modified by words associated with negativity, and hides itself in Tao, the original and ultimate reunion of all contradictory features in existence. Wu's importance lies in You's reliance due to their simultaneous appearances and operations. Laotse holds the firm belief that owing to the ubiquitous relativities in existence, all things remain as the results and embodiments reflecting the effects of the supplementary and the compatible (Laotse 2012, chp. 10 "Embracing the One," p. 134). Despite common people's general pursuit of the positive elements, Laotse attaches considerable importance to the negative as well as the subsequent profound connotations. The assertion of the negative leads people to do only what must be done in their actual life, confirming to the essential law of magic's implementation in *The Earthsea World*. As a result, the negative is the cradle nourishing the power that is positively powerful and influential in the establishment and maintenance of equilibrium.

The ultimate realization of equilibrium in *The Earthsea Cycle* requests magic as a tool to discover, explore, and utilize the positive power of the superficially negative forces. According to Taoism, Laotse holds the firm belief that "when the people of the Earth all know beauty as beauty; There arises (the recognition) of ugliness. When the people of the Earth all know good as good; There arises (the recognition) of evil" (Laotse 2012, chp. 2 "The Rise of Opposite Relatives," p. 47). The occurrences of good and evil and the combination of positive as well as negative factors work in harmony and concord to accomplish the completeness and wholeness in all things of this infinite universe. Similarly, the avoidance of disturbing and eventually destroying the delicate and intricate balance is insured with the rules supervising and restricting the use of magic in *The Earthsea Cycle*, particularly in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. The instructions by the Master of Hand reveals to Ged the secret that no magic should be performed unless its use is called for by nature. The reason is that "the world is in balance, in Equilibrium" (Le Guin 2012, p. 51), and "a wizard's power of Changing and Summoning can shake the balance of the world" (Le Guin 2012, p. 51). Consequently, the positive power bred from the negative forces is of tremendous significance in the blueprint of equilibrium of the Earthsea world.

Similar to the establishment of equilibrium, its restoration in both the physical world and people's inner spiritual homeland reiterates the magic power of Wu as an indispensable part. According to Taoism, "when the mind is clear, it thinks well. When knowledge is cleared of obstacles, one attains the character of Tao. Tao must not be blocked" (Chuangtse 2012, pp. 143–45). Correspondingly, Le Guin resonates with the Taoist recognition of the power and possibility in Wu through detailed elaborations on Hort Town in *The Earthsea Cycle* where "silks, satins, canvases, furs, felts, woolens, fleecefells of Gont, gauzes of Sowl, silks of Lorbanery" (Le Guin 1972, p. 41) are bargained about, sold, and purchased in the boisterous market that serves as a powerful embodiment of the people's blatant and blind pursuit of materialized luxury. According to Le Guin's vivid depictions, the common people in Hort Town become the slaves of their desire for material enjoyments, while the

wizards and witches there are inevitably enslaved by their own greed of immortality, or rather, their unconscious fear of death. It is exactly their desire and pursuit of the worldly possession appearing in various forms that bring crime, filth, and disorder to every corner of the Hort Town, the miniature of the bigger society and the whole world. Therefore, Le Guin downplays Wu and the negative forces in order to emphasize their significance.

While the establishment of equilibrium in *The Earthsea Cycle* mainly refers to that of the physical world as well as the natural environment, its restoration of equilibrium draws the readers' attention to that of the protagonists' spiritual homeland. The external equilibrium is delicate and intricate in that it can be easily disrupted and even completely destroyed with the deterioration of people's inner peace. To be more specific, *A Wizard of Earthsea* constructs a series of distinctive heroic images by placing tremendous emphasis on the inner equilibrium within the protagonists themselves as the ultimate source of their intelligence and power. Different from the majority of heroes and heroines in the literary works that take the initiative to step on an adverse adventure for the pursuit of happiness, self-fulfillment, and glory, Ged is driven to his self-exiling journey because of his sin "using his power wrongly," which means he "summoned a spirit from the dead, but with it came one of the Powers of unlife, and "it is the shadow of your arrogance, the shadow of your ignorance, the shadow you cast" (Le Guin 2012, p. 66). Hence, the disruption and disorder of one's inner equilibrium is regarded as an insignificant incident that might touch off an apocalypse.

Completing one's wholeness of the inner self with the help of magic and by embracing the superficially dark or evil side sets up the prerequisite for the restoration of equilibrium in *The Earthsea Cycle*. Encountering and overcoming various kinds of obstacles along the treacherous journey win Ged some glorious titles such as the dragonlord. Nevertheless, all the respectable honors he wins and the incredible magic tricks he masters do not bring the relentless shadow down. On the contrary, with the passage of time, the shadow grows at a constantly accelerating pace to such an extent that it poses a serious threat to Ged attempting to take possession of Ged, both physically and mentally. Under Ogion's instructions and with Vetch's assistance, Ged eventually seizes the opportunity to confront his shadow at the furthest end of the Open Sea where "aloud and clearly, breaking that old silence, Ged spoke the shadow's name," and "light and darkness met, and joined, and were one" (Le Guin 2012, p. 179). "The wound is healed," he says, "I am whole, I am free." Then, Ged bends over and hides his face in his arms, weeping like a boy (Le Guin 2012, p. 180). Thus, the restoration of the inner equilibrium reactivates the peace of the Earthsea world.

The restoration of equilibrium in *The Earthsea Cycle*, particularly *The Farthest Shore*, is further approached from a collective perspective instead of a personal one. On the one hand, the cause of the disturbance in equilibrium can be traced back to the collective actions taken by the whole human society. Starting with the devastating tidings, the Earthsea world in *The Farthest Shore* witnesses in horror how "the spring of the wizardry have run dry" (Le Guin 1972, p. 6). When people regard the possession of power in a superior position surpassing that of life, the desire of wealth, reputation, social status and even immortality transforms itself into greed. Allied with knowledge and intelligence, greed turns itself into evil, which poses a grave threat to equilibrium of the world (Le Guin 1972, p. 36). On the other hand, the restoration of equilibrium requires all people's awakening and consciousness. The lack of such joint-efforts in *The Farthest Shore* is depicted emphatically with the drainage of all Ged's magic and power. Ged returns to his Isle Gont with the assistance of the ancestral dragon, goes "afoot up into the forests of the mountain" (Le Guin 1972, p. 197), and thus ends the conflicts and his own legend. Consequently, equilibrium in the Earthsea world is a collective concept extending beyond the separated individuals.

It is evident that magic serves as the key to unlocking the mystery in both the establishment and restoration of equilibrium in the Earthsea world. Various examples from the Earthsea tales also reveal the latent yet elaborate inherent relationship among magic, equilibrium and Taoism. From the perspective of the establishment of equilibrium in *The Earthsea Cycle*, the harmonious combination and coexistence of the relative and opposite

elements in nature provide the necessary platform and create the favorable conditions. The pairings of positive and negative forces, whose major embodiment is Taoist concepts such as You and Wu, undergo a series of chemical reactions due to their interactions, independence, and even integration, with magic being an effective and efficient catalyst. More importantly, the negative elements are capable of being positively involved in the process of the natural evolution. When it comes to the restoration of equilibrium in *The Earthsea Cycle*, embracing both the positive and negative sides, completing the wholeness as a comprehensive human being, and maintaining the inner peace constitute the prerequisite for the accomplishment of the restored equilibrium in the phenomenal world. What is more important is that the complete destruction or the formidable restoration of equilibrium must be approached from a collective aspect. In summary, the Earthsea magic works miracles within the Taoist framework to establish, restore and maintain equilibrium.

## 5. Conclusions

There are implied meanings and profound messages conveyed by magic from the Taoist perspective. Magic is one of the paramount metaphorical symbols in *The Earthsea Cycle*. Healing, harmonious dialectics, and equilibrium as key words form a relatively systematic view of the Earthsea magic's Taoist interpretations. First, defined in an unconventional way by Le Guin, magic in the Earthsea world is never meant to fall into the same category of weaponry, gunpowder and artillery. In contrast, Le Guin endows magic in the Earthsea world with the healing power drawn from the Taoist philosophy. In *The Earthsea Cycle*, magic heals and never harms, because it guides the people to regard the different sides of all things as one. Second, as the alternative to the prevalent dichotomy of good and evil permeating the western literature, culture, and philosophy, harmonious dialectics is emphatically represented with the use of magic in the Earthsea world. Magic provides people with the required tranquility in time and space to have a full picture of existence, whose main manifestations include life and death, light and dark, as well as good and evil. Third, laying a solid foundation for the establishment of equilibrium in both the phenomenal world and people's inner state, magic also takes up the responsibility to maintain and restore the balance in existence. Most importantly, both the laws of relativity and the positive power of the negativity can be discovered in all of the significant Earthsea elements illustrated above. Thereupon, magic plays an indispensable role in constructing and refining the Earthsea world by fully exerting its healing power, comprehensively regarding the existence with harmonious dialectics, and effectively sustaining the balance and equilibrium.

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