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How to Cope with Loneliness during the COVID-19 Pandemic? Perspectives of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism

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Abstract: The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's long-standing group life, and "less gathering" has become a popular slogan during this period. People will probably feel lonely when they are physically, socially, or mentally distanced and isolated or excluded, and they usually perceive a deficiency in the quality or quantity of their social relationships. Although loneliness is easily conflated with solitude, loneliness as an emotion is generally regarded as negative while solitude can be positive. There are various causes and effects of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic, and loneliness has been found to have significant impacts on poorer physical and mental health. Religiosity and spirituality are specifically proven to have a great impact on handling loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. When regarding belongingness as the opposite of loneliness and social isolation, religious belonging means a feeling of being "at home" and "connected". In this paper, from a comparative approach, we attempt to investigate how the three most prominent traditions in East Asia, i.e., Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, can help manage the feeling of loneliness. Due to different understandings of loneliness, their coping strategies for loneliness also vary. Through a preliminary study of "benevolence and rites," "wu-wei and freedom," and "mindfulness and spiritual realization," we can learn from the ancient wisdom about how to reduce loneliness and promote spiritual well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; mental health; loneliness; solitude; Confucianism; Buddhism; Daoism; entering into the world; wu-wei; mindfulness

1. Introduction

With more than 629.37 million confirmed cases and 6.58 million deaths around the world as of 7 November 2022 (World Health Organization 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic has been considered not only a health crisis that is killing people, spreading human suffering, and upending people's lives, but also a human, economic, and social crisis that attacks societies at their core (United Nations 2020). Due to the continuous evolution of the coronavirus variants (such as Alpha, Beta, Delta, and Omicron), human beings have not found a complete solution to the pandemic, which means that we may live in the COVID-19 era for a long time, and while the COVID-19 emergency may soon be over, the pandemic is not (Furuse and Oshitani 2020; Miller 2022).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016), there are generally three effective ways to stop the transmission of infectious virus: first, to control the source of the virus, e.g., putting masks on the patients, ensuring appropriate patient placement, and using disposable or dedicated patient-care equipment; second, to cut off the transmission route of the virus, e.g., limiting the transport and movement of patients and prioritizing cleaning and disinfection of the rooms of patients; third, to protect susceptible persons, e.g., immunizing susceptible persons as soon as possible and using personal protective equipment (PPE) appropriately. At the beginning of the pandemic, because of

the virus' rapid spread, the large number of infected people, and the momentary difficulty in locating the source of the virus, most countries adopted the method of cutting off the transmission route through social distancing and isolation (Wells et al. 2021; Zou et al. 2022). People were advised to stay at home, not go outside or gather together unnecessarily, and some cities or countries were even put into lockdown in critical periods (Atalan 2020; Onyeaka et al. 2021). However, the distancing measures in the COVID-19 pandemic have reduced the connection with others and increased loneliness (Dahlberg 2021; Killgore et al. 2020).

Human beings are social animals, which has been acknowledged at least since the time of Aristotle and has since been confirmed by social scientists from various fields (Merkelbach 2022, p. 143). Individuals experience loneliness when they perceive a deficiency in the quality or quantity of their social relationships (Mund et al. 2020). Due to the subjective nature of loneliness, individuals might be lonely even if they have a large personal network, or they might not feel lonely despite having only few confidants (Mund et al. 2020). Through a systematic review with a meta-analysis, Ernst et al. (2022) found that loneliness scores and prevalence rates had increased relative to pre-pandemic times with small effect sizes. By comparing the data from 31,000 UK adults during 2017–2019 with 60,000 UK adults during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bu et al. (2020) found that while some risk factors for loneliness were the same as in ordinary circumstances (e.g., gender and people living alone), other groups experienced an even greater risk of loneliness than usual (e.g., younger people and people of low income), and some groups were at risk of loneliness who were not usually considered high risk (e.g., students).

It should be noted that we chose the three traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism because they are generally regarded as the most prominent philosophical or religious schools shared by major East Asian societies and have great impact on the East Asian political culture as well as on East Asian spiritual life (Tu 1981; Zhou et al. 2021). While there are definitely other important philosophical and religious perspectives, we confine our research to the above three due to our research competence and the space limit of this article. Furthermore, contemporary philosophical practitioners, especially philosophical counselors and therapists, are attempting to use philosophical theories and thinking as a guide to living a eudaimonic life (Devarakonda 2021; Ma et al. 2021; Marinoff 1999). Underneath this trend, philosophical doctrines have been widely applied in resolving mental issues such as moral dilemmas (Ding 2019; Matchett 2019) and the sense of meaninglessness (Ding et al. 2019) in modern society. As loneliness has significant impacts on poorer physical and mental health (see Section 2), we think, as philosophers, that we are to some extent obligated to employ the ancient wisdom in the management of people's feelings of loneliness, particularly during the post-COVID-19 era (Feary 2020; Repetti 2020). We believe that by providing this philosophical approach to handling loneliness, we can enrich the literature and deepen the theoretical foundation of the current empirical research on loneliness.

Therefore, in this paper, following the contemporary philosophical practice movement, which regards philosophy as a way of life and spiritual exercises toward truth, wisdom, and virtue (Ding and Yu 2022), we intend to look at the issue of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic through the perspectives of three prominent religious/philosophical traditions in East Asia, i.e., Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. In the following, we will first of all outline the various causes and effects of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Section 2) and discuss the way that "religious belonging" or "rhizomatic belonging" can help make people feel "at home" and not lonely (see Section 3). Furthermore, based on the Confucian idea of "entering into the world," the Daoist idea of "attuning oneself to Dao through solitude" and the Buddhist idea of regarding "loneliness as the Noble Truth of Suffering," we can see how ancient scholars understood and dealt with loneliness in different ways; more specifically, through "benevolence and rites," "wu-wei and freedom," and "mindfulness and spiritual realization," we can learn from these ancient

wisdom about how to deal with loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic appropriately (see Section 4).

2. Causes and Effects of Loneliness during the COVID-19 Pandemic

It is of great importance for us to distinguish between loneliness (which is generally negative) and solitude (which can be positive and beneficial) (Burger 1995; Long and Averill 2003). According to Stern (2021), "loneliness," "aloneness" and "solitude" for centuries had been barely differentiated from each other until the nineteenth century, and in languages other than English, there may be "one word covering all the various meanings of both solitude and loneliness", as in the Chinese 孤單/孤獨, or there may be "a range of different words and meanings covering negative, neutral and positive senses of the terms". The widely used UCLA Loneliness Scale, for example, clearly reflects loneliness as a negative affect (depression and anxiety) that reflects a sense of social isolation and perceived inadequacies in interpersonal relationships (Russell et al. 1978, 1980; Russell 1996), which is not the same as solitude or the intentional seeking of solitude for repose, reflection, study, or meditation. In fact, by conducting individual interviews with 180 second, fourth, and sixth graders from Athens, Greece, Galanaki (2004) showed that school-age children were able to distinguish among the concepts of aloneness, loneliness, and solitude, although they frequently associated being alone with feeling lonely; while the ability to recognize the existence of solitude was extremely limited among second graders, it increased dramatically up to the beginning of adolescence. Furthermore, through a computational linguistics approach, Hipson et al. (2021) compared the emotional content of over 19 million tweets containing the terms solitude and lonely/loneliness, finding that the term solitude tended to be used in more positive and less emotionally activated (i.e., with lower arousal) contexts compared to the terms lonely and loneliness, and specifically, the term solitude co-occurred more with words corresponding to joy and less to words corresponding to anger, fear, and sadness.

Undoubtedly, humans as social creatures rely on safe and secure social surroundings to survive and thrive, while perceptions of social isolation, or loneliness, influence physiological functioning, diminish sleep quality, and increase morbidity and mortality (Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for the needs of pandemic prevention and control, people's lives were often forced to be put on hold. In particular, people living alone, in the long interrupted life of quarantine, as they could only face virtual characters every day, developed more lonely feelings, and when they could not find relief from their negative emotions for a long time, some people would even become depressed (Luchetti et al. 2020; Mazza et al. 2020). In particular, for the students, the traditional teaching in classrooms has been turned into online teaching (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021), which means that students cannot interact with teachers and communicate with their classmates as frequently and easily as before.

There are many factors associated with loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Age (in a U-shape way), gender, quality of social contacts, low competence, socio-economic status, and chronic medical conditions are significant predictors of loneliness (Solmi et al. 2020). While older age and larger social networks were associated with less loneliness, more virtual social contact was associated with more loneliness (Rumas et al. 2021). Although social relationships were related to loneliness both before and during the pandemic, only one functional feature of social relationships (satisfaction with communication during the pandemic) buffered the adverse effects of the major stressful event (Macdonald and Hülür 2021). Notably, a longitudinal, nationwide sample (N total = 6010) collected over the course of the first 3 months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany found that when in-person social contact restrictions were put in place, greater increases in loneliness were experienced by women, younger, extraverted, neurotic, and conscientious individuals (Entringer and Gosling 2022). Meanwhile, Gubler et al. (2021) examined how neuroticism, extraversion, and emotion regulation were related to loneliness during 6 weeks of major public life restrictions in the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland, concluding that neu-

roticism and emotion regulation strategies were associated with higher loneliness, and for introverts, maladaptive cognitive strategies such as rumination or catastrophizing were related to higher levels of loneliness. In addition, Ray (2021) showed a considerable overlap between people's romantic relationship status (i.e., whether someone is in a committed romantic relationship or not) and their living arrangements (i.e., whether someone lives alone or with others) in predicting loneliness during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

When speaking of consequences, loneliness has a significant effect on poorer physical and mental health (Chen et al. 2022; Kahlon et al. 2021; Varga et al. 2021), and greater loneliness is associated with reduced quality of life (Kasar and Karaman 2021; Rumas et al. 2021). An umbrella review, including 18 outcomes, 795 studies, and 746,706 participants, found that loneliness is strongly associated with incident dementia, prevalent paranoia, and prevalent psychotic symptoms (Solmi et al. 2020). Loneliness in the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to substance use (Horigian et al. 2021), internet addiction (Bonsaksen et al. 2021; Rogier et al. 2021), and smartphone addiction (Kayis et al. 2021). In particular, loneliness was significantly associated with suicide attempts and depressive symptoms (Solmi et al. 2020). A 12-year cohort study in England showed that irrespective of other social experiences, higher loneliness scores at the baseline were associated with higher depression symptom severity scores during 12 years of follow-up among adults aged 50 years and older (Lee et al. 2021). While feeling alone is one of the most prominent stressors due to COVID-19, another national, population-representative, longitudinal study of U.S. adults has found that 32.8% of U.S. adults experienced elevated depressive symptoms in 2021, compared to 27.8% of adults in the early months of the pandemic in 2020, and 8.5% before the pandemic (Ettman et al. 2022).

3. Loneliness, Religious Belonging, and Spiritual Well-Being

It is also of great significance to consider what people are actually searching for when they strive to get rid of loneliness. Pospíšil and Macháčková (2021) regard belongingness as the opposite of loneliness and social isolation. Many people belong religiously, feeling connected to something which transcends them (Oostveen 2019). Antonsich (2010) distinguishes "place-belongingness" (a personal, intimate feeling or emotional attachment of being "at home" and "safe" in a place) from the "politics of belonging" (a discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion) and advocates that the absence of place-belongingness results in "a sense of loneliness, isolation, alienation, and dis-placement". In a similar vein, Berghuijs (2017) develops a new approach to religious belonging, not in an exclusive, "property" sense, but in terms of "feeling at home with", "being related to", and "being connected to" certain religious practices, beliefs, people, and ways of life.

Oostveen (2019) further extends the concept of "religious belonging" beyond self-identification with religious traditions and proposes "rhizomatic belonging" as a form of religious belonging which "combines the multiplicity and decentrality of religious forms, with the very unique, personal, and unitary feeling of religious 'belonging.'" As a philosophical concept derived from biology, the "rhizome" functions to "represent non-hierarchical connections between multiple elements," and by taking "connectivity" as its first principle, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987; Oostveen 2019). In fact, an interesting case of "rhizomatic belonging" is provided by Daoism. Historically, Daoist identities have never had the same exclusivist connotations as is often the case with people in Christian or Muslim cultures (Oostveen 2019). As only approximately 7% of practicing Daoists also self-identified as such in the People's Republic of China (12 million out of 173 million people), Oostveen (2019) further concludes that although Daoism lacks a strong sense of popular self-identification, it instead "creates assemblages of ritual and symbols to which many different people can connect," which exemplifies the uniqueness of Daoist belonging.

It is noteworthy that the COVID-19 pandemic is found to have had a great impact on people's perceived loneliness and spiritual well-being (meaning, peace, and faith), and the predictive models reveal that the greatest protector for symptomatology is spiritual well-being, while loneliness is the strongest predictor of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Ausín et al. 2021; González-Sanguino et al. 2020, 2021; Hwang et al. 2020). The negative correlation between loneliness and spiritual well-being (existential and religious well-being) has long been noticed (Ellison 1983; Scott et al. 1998), and the second most frequently used category of approach-coping strategies of the chronically ill comprised spirituality strategies, including engaging in prayer and religious practices and using internal dialogue in confirming God's goodness and unending assistance with life's trials, which could help people gain strength and feel less lonely (Miller 1983, 1985).

Loneliness and spirituality are intertwined with each other. Büssing et al. (2021) revealed that loneliness/social isolation could imply dissatisfaction with the current life and may also affect spiritual well-being and the relationship with God, and it is one of the best predictors of spiritual dryness (a specific form of spiritual struggle). In particular, spirituality and religiosity have been proven to have a great impact on people's perception of and adaptation to loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that higher rates of social isolation and loneliness in older people are associated with significantly increased morbidity and mortality, and the researchers suggested various solutions, including maintaining any spiritual or religious affiliation via virtual events such as free classes online, live streaming of prayer services, and community gatherings on Zoom (Roy et al. 2020). Heidari et al. (2020) further argue that a way to counteract loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic is to deepen and strengthen religious faith, taking full advantage of spirituality against the loneliness caused by the pandemic, and the target population for spiritual care covers not only patients but also those affected by the pandemic in terms of occupation, relationships, and lifestyle. Similarly, Hamilton et al. (2022) reported that spirituality enabled African American breast cancer survivors to buffer the short- and long-term effects of social isolation and loneliness resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic through "(1) increased engagement in religious activities, (2) reliance on God for protection when feeling isolated, (3) finding joy and courage from listening to gospel music and reading scripture, and (4) finding meaning through spirituality".

Although Entringer and Gosling (2022) implied that the increases in loneliness in relation to the contact restrictions were rather temporary (or state-like) and may not have affected levels of chronic (trait) loneliness, given the wide impacts of loneliness on human beings, we still need to understand it wisely and treat it correctly. In this article, we attempt to interpret loneliness from the three perspectives of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and we discuss how they can help to understand, manage, and reduce loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. It should be noted that, due to the limitation of space and research capacity, we mainly focus on state loneliness caused by the COVID-19 pandemic without examining further trait loneliness, which does not mean in the least that the latter is not important. On the contrary, autistic people need more active attention from relevant professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bundy et al. 2022; Pellicano et al. 2022), and we will further expand our research horizon to analyze and respond to a wider range of loneliness phenomena and problems in the future.

4. Understanding and Treating Loneliness from the Perspectives of Three Traditions

Loneliness is no stranger to anyone, and there are different understandings and treatment of loneliness by Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism (see Table 1). In contemporary times, we are more likely to feel lonely (Killeen 1998; Matthews et al. 2019). However, from the perspectives of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, loneliness is actually an opportunity for us to shape and develop ourselves in such a state. However, if such loneliness has become so serious that it has affected people's physical or mental health, then people have to seek social support or professional help in a timely manner (Devarakonda

2021; Feary 2020). In the following, we will explore the three traditions and see how they might help to understand, manage, and reduce loneliness.

Table 1. Different understanding and treatment of loneliness by the three traditions.

Three Prominent Traditions in East Asia	Understanding of Loneliness	Treatment for Loneliness
Confucianism	Loneliness should not be a common state for people. People have to live in society. While people can be alone, they should pursue the harmonious coexistence between themselves and the outer world.	People should actively enter into the world and care about others so that they will feel more connected and less lonely. Through practicing benevolence and rites, people can hopefully transcend the personal loneliness and be cultivated into a nobleman.
Daoism	Dao is that which gives birth to and forever connects everything. Loneliness means being disconnected from Dao, and people can have a better chance to realize Dao when they are alone.	People should attune themselves to Dao through solitude by practicing the principles of wu-wei and freedom. When people become more deeply engaged in and with the world, they will feel and live in a deeper connection with all Nature, and then the loneliness will probably be mitigated.
Buddhism	Loneliness as a kind of suffering comes from people's attachment to and craving for dependency on others. People should approach aloneness because the conventional way of life is filled with defilements.	People should spiritually renounce the earthly world, which is full of desires and temptations and is a source of suffering. In order to relieve loneliness, practitioners should manage their desires and focus on cultivating their spiritual awareness through mindfulness.

4.1. Confucian Wisdom

Confucius (551–479 B.C.), the founder of Confucianism, was born in the late Spring and Autumn period 春秋時期 (770–476 B.C.), during which the Zhou dynasty was in decline, the rites and music were in ruins, and the whole society was in turmoil. Confucius saw that individuals could barely survive in such an environment; so, he put forward the idea of "perfect virtue," i.e., benevolence 仁, and proposed that "the practice of benevolence is from a man himself 為仁由己" (*The Analects 論語, 「武英殿十三經注疏」本「論語注疏」*, chapter "Yan Yuan 顏淵") (Legge 1861a). In other words, to implement benevolence, the key lies in oneself. A benevolent person "subdues one's self and returns to propriety 克己復禮" (*The Analects 論語「武英殿十三經注疏」本「論語注疏」*, chapter "Yan Yuan 顏淵") (Legge 1861a).

4.1.1. Entering into the World

Confucius put forward the idea of "benevolence" with the purpose of "cultivating one's persons, regulating one's families, rightly governing one's states and making the whole kingdom tranquil and happy 修身, 齊家, 治國, 平天下" (*The Book of Rites 禮記, 「武英殿十三經注疏」本「禮記正義」*, chapter "The Great Learning 大學") (Legge 1885). In other words, to improve one's own moral cultivation, one should manage one's own household affairs and govern one's own place well, so as to finally make the country peaceful and the people safe. In Confucius' view, human beings are living in society, without which individuals cannot show their value or find their own meaning in life. It is precisely because Confucius closely linked individuals to society, and most of the representatives of the Confucian school did the same, later generations often attributed the Confucian school to the proponents of "entering into the world 入世". For Confucius, "entering into the world or not" implicates people's different life attitudes towards how one should relate to the world and others. When one chooses to enter into the world, it means that he or she wants to be included in society and connect with others. Therefore, "entering into the world" implies actively responding to loneliness and reducing the feeling of loneliness by transferring one's physical, social, or mental condition from being distanced, isolated, or

excluded, to being connected, related, or united (see Table 1). In general, this is the Confucian way of how to understand, manage, and reduce loneliness.

Confucius' own entering into the world could be clearly shown from his passion for education and politics. Confucius is honored as the first private teacher in China to offer private education to the masses (Murray 2009). For Confucius, the primary function of education is to provide the proper way of training noblemen 君子 (*junzi*), a process that involves constant self-improvement and continuous social interactions, and a natural consequence of true education is public service, to transform and improve society (Tu 1998). Slingerland (2003, p. 67) regards "Virtue" as both powerful and attractive, and individual salvation is transformed into universal salvation through "Virtue". Furthermore, "Virtue is not left to stand alone. He who practices it will have neighbors 德不孤, 必有鄰" (*The Analects 論語, 「武英殿十三經注疏」本「論語注疏」*, chapter "Li Ren 里仁") (Legge 1861a). Therefore, the interaction with others in society is very important for a man to grow up into a nobleman, while isolation from society and living apart from others will negatively influence people's self-cultivation (see Table 1).

More specifically, "entering into the world" could be further demonstrated in Confucianism's Five Cardinal Virtues 五常 (*wu chang*), i.e., benevolence 仁, righteousness 義, rites 禮, wisdom 智, and trustworthiness 信. For example, Confucian benevolence is reflected in the hope that people can live in harmony with each other in society. Qian (2004) interpreted this idea as follows: "I can only realize myself among others. If I leave others, there will also be no myself. The highest virtue of Shun 舜 and Duke of Zhou 周公 lies in their filial piety, and the highest character of Shun and Duke of Zhou is to become a filial son. But if there are no parents, there will be no identity of a filial son, and how can there be the expression of the virtue of filial piety and the completion of the character of filial piety?" Therefore, benevolence is essentially relational and social, and a person's relational self should fit comfortably with collectivism and *guanxi* 關系 (relationships/connections), a modern day version of Confucian relationalism (Lin 2011; Ip 2009). Of the various relationships, the most important ones were known as the Five Cardinal Relationships 五倫 (*wu lun*): ruler–subject, father–son, husband–wife, elder brother–younger brother, and friend–friend (Chen and Chen 2004). As times change and societies develop, the nature of the relationships has also evolved since the time of Confucius, but the countries of Confucian East Asia, such as China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam, remain very much relationship-oriented (Nguyen 2008; Tu 2017; Woodside 2017).

The principle of benevolence does not only apply between people, but also between people and everything else, which is precisely the "harmony 和" of Confucianism. Harmony is the highest ideal for Confucianism as a whole (Li 2006, 2008, 2013), which can be seen as a state that enables people to live in harmony with each other, with society, and with nature, and it can also be a positive way of resolving conflicts. Interpersonal harmony among the Five Cardinal Relationships has long been emphasized in traditional Confucian ideology, which can help maintain not only social order, but also the well-being of individuals in Eastern societies (Cheung et al. 2001; Chuang 2005; Kwan et al. 1997).

4.1.2. The Practice of "Benevolence" and "Rites"

Even though Confucianism emphasizes active participation in the world, at the same time, it has also explicated in detail different forms of solitude and loneliness. For example, when responding to King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王, Mencius (c. 372–289 B.C.) mentioned that when King Wen of Zhou 周文王 ruled Qishan 岐山, "There were the old and wifeless, or widowers; the old and husbandless, or widows; the old and childless, or solitaries; the young and fatherless, or orphans—these four classes are the most destitute of the people, and have none to whom they can tell their wants 老而無妻曰鰥, 老而無夫曰寡, 老而無子曰獨, 幼而無父曰孤. 此四者, 天下之窮民而無告者" (*Mencius 孟子, 「武英殿十三經注疏」本「孟子注疏」*, chapter "King Hui of Liang 梁惠王") (Legge 1861b). Confucius, insofar as we know him, is the one who had countless disciples under him, traveling around the world and talking eloquently with his superiors. From the perspective of com-

mon sense, Confucius can hardly be lonely. However, from the perspective of his life path, he was indeed often spiritually alone. In the eyes of a gatekeeper encountered by Zi Lu 子路, Confucius is a man who knows the impracticable nature of the times and yet intends to do something 知其不可而為之 (*The Analects 論語*, 「武英殿十三經注疏」本「論語注疏」, chapter "Xian Wen 憲問") (Legge 1861a).

Confucius had been wandering all his life. Although there were countless disciples under his door, Yan Hui 顏回 was the only one who could be called a confidant by him. But Yan Hui unfortunately died at an early age. When the states were at war and divided, Confucius traveled around the world to promote his political ideas. However, from the beginning to the end of the state of Lu 魯國, until his death, he did not see the prosperous world of peace he had hoped for. When Zi Gong 子貢 asked why no one understood Confucius, Confucius replied: "I do not murmur against Heaven. I do not grumble against men. My studies lie low, and my penetration rises high. But there is Heaven - that knows me 不怨天, 不尤人. 下學而上達. 知我者, 其天乎!" (*The Analects 論語*, 「武英殿十三經注疏」本「論語注疏」, chapter "Xian Wen 憲問") (Legge 1861a). Confucius thought that the only one who could understand him was Heaven. Confucius' life was a pursuit of "benevolence," but when he proposed his political ideas, most of the kings, such as Duke Jing of Qi 齊景公, would only say that "I am old; I cannot use his (Confucius') doctrines 吾老矣, 不能用也" (*The Analects 論語*, 「武英殿十三經注疏」本「論語注疏」, chapter "Wei Zi 微子") (Legge 1861a). In Confucius' persistent pursuit of benevolence, he was often not understood by others. However, he could well have spiritually surrendered to being misunderstood but still have retained his deep sense of connectivity to others (Ames 2011) and not felt isolated or lonely.

Under the influence of Confucianism, many Confucian scholars were able to find relief from their sense of loneliness. Such was the case of Su Shi 蘇軾 (Su Dongpo, 1037–1101 C.E.), the famous poet in the Song Dynasty. Su Shi was demoted three times and was not appreciated by the superiors. He called himself a "lonely traveler 孤旅人", exclaiming that the world was too big for the lonely travelers to escape from (Su 2019, p. 25). "Solitude" is a common theme in Su Shi's poems: "People are planting elms and willows, waiting for ten mu of shade. I plant pines and cypresses alone, hoping to guard my piece of sincere heart 人皆種榆柳, 坐待十畝陰. 我獨種松柏, 守此一片心" (Su 2014, p. 187). Su Shi frequently expressed his loneliness through lonely objects in his poems. At the same time, his demotion and promotion reflected his concern for society as a Confucian, through which we can see similar loneliness and conflicts in the life of Su Shi and Confucius. The loneliness of Confucian scholars mainly lies in the fact that they are not understood by the world and that their lofty ambitions cannot be realized. What they pursue is to "enter into the world," and even a temporary retreat is pursued with the intent to better "enter into the world" later.

Confucian influence allowed scholars to relieve their loneliness by encouraging them to actively participate in the worldly issues in a different way even when they were experiencing difficult times in their lives. Take Su Shi as an example. In his several times of demotions and promotions, he always tried to "guard his piece of sincere heart" and still kept his concerns for society. During his political frustration and his separation from the imperial court, he had done a lot for the local people, and he was in turn welcomed and respected by the people. On the other hand, he also took good care of himself, tasting delicious dishes (the famous Dongpo Pork was named after him), making friends with people from different backgrounds, spending time on literary creation and calligraphy, and waiting for his chance to come. In the heated discussion on the relationship between *wen* 文 (writing, literature, and culture) and Dao (in a general sense), Su Shi stressed the necessity of subjective, individual experience as "giving access, and concrete expression, to Dao", asserting that "the quest for unity with the Dao could only be realized through direct, personal engagement in *wen* and other forms of meaningful practice" (Virág 2014). In fact, while Su Shi's early education was very much a Confucian one and he regarded his commentary on the Confucian classics as his greatest achievement in life (Grant 1987; Yu 2009), his thoughts and writing were also profoundly influenced by Daoism and Buddhism, es-

pecially Chan Buddhism (Egan and Su 1994; Hegel 1998), which was prevalent in his time. To save space, we will not discuss further in this paper how Daoism and Buddhism have helped Su Shi spend his lonely days during the demotions.

It needs to be noted that Confucianism is sometimes accused of making people less willing to express their emotions or find social support, which then leads to mental maladjustment such as excessive stress or deep loneliness (Jung and Wang 2018; Young 2017). Kim (2021) then proposed the Confucian ritual as a way to escape loneliness and isolation in modern society, to develop and sustain strong social bonds and relationships, and to build flourishing families and communities. As one of the five cardinal virtues, "rites" refers to "all those 'objective' prescriptions of behavior, whether involving rite, ceremony, manners, or general deportment, that bind human beings and the spirits together in networks of interacting roles within the family, within human society, and with the numinous realm beyond" (Schwartz 1985, p. 67). Through "rites", interactions between people become ritualistic and aesthetic (Herr 2003). According to Kim (2021), the remedy for loneliness or social disconnection/isolation is not simply more social interactions because, as social creatures, human beings need more ritualized relationships structured around common activities governed by shared norms and ends, while rituals provide people with a genuine sense of community and friendship. In a similar vein, Ten Elshof (2015, pp. 13–14) argues that reflection on the Confucian Way may inspire deeper remedies for the profound loneliness so characteristic of contemporary Western life, because the deep cure for loneliness (the path to genuine belonging) runs through the process of learning how to live well in the various dynamics that make for family life and social behaviors, such as the Confucian virtues of filial piety 孝 and loyalty 忠, two types of arrangements for the interpersonal relationships between the self and others (Hwang 1999; Yeh and Bedford 2003).

However, just like doctors may fall ill and psychological counselors could become depressed, the Confucian scholars throughout history, who are all supposed to be bound by rites, could also lament about their loneliness. The presupposition behind our argumentation on the function of rites in relieving loneliness is that the enhanced social connection with others and society can help to reduce people's loneliness because, by definition, loneliness is highly correlated with one's perceived isolation from the outer world and inadequacy in social relationships (Mund et al. 2020). Yet, to be realistic, while rites could be effective in relieving loneliness in theory, there is no guarantee that everyone who follows rites can be rid of loneliness. On the one hand, there could be a discrepancy between theory and practice and knowledge and behavior (Hou et al. 2022). People may have not followed the principle of rites in a correct and active way, so that the loneliness-relieving function of rites cannot be properly performed. On the other hand, sometimes conventional rites and the passive execution of rites can make people feel even more lonely and isolated, because they have been restricted by the rites without inner identification with such norms. The Confucian rites principle emphasizes social obligations, dictating that people must follow a proper way in social interaction, such as the respect for age, authority, and social norms; therefore, people who adhere to rites tend to behave in ways designed to display, enhance, and protect both the image and the reality of their hierarchical position in social structures (Hong and Engeström 2004). While Confucius frequently emphasized the importance and goodness of the historical form of rites, not everyone shared his enthusiasm for tradition, and some (e.g., Mohism) even had good reasons to think that the old rites would bring unnecessary harm and burdens to people, both mentally and physically (Lai 1995; Park et al. 2005). When external rites contradict inner genuine feeling, Confucius maintains that "it is better to follow our inner feeling" (Lu 2020), in which case rites will be off the main stage to a certain extent.

4.2. Daoist Wisdom

Unlike the Confucian view of pursuing active entry into the world, what Daoism yearns for is a relaxed attitude toward life (see Table 1). In "On the essentials of the six schools 論六家要旨", Sima Tan 司馬談 criticized the other five schools (the Yin-Yang School

陰陽家, the Confucian School 儒家, the Mohist School 墨家, the School of Logicians 名家, and the School of Legalists 法家). Instead, he believed that Daoism had combined the advantages of the other five schools: "Daoism makes people concentrate on the spirit and act in accordance with the invisible 'Dao', so that all things are rich and abundant. The art of Daoism is based on the theory of Yin-Yang School about the sequence of four seasons. It absorbs the strengths of Confucianism and Mohism, summarizes the essentials of the schools of Logicians and Legalists, develops with the development of the times, conforms to the changes of things, establishes good customs, and applies it to human affairs. It is all suitable. Its meaning is simple and easy to grasp, with little efforts and much effectiveness 道家使人精神專一, 動合無形, 贍足萬物. 其為術也, 因陰陽之大順, 采儒墨之善, 撮名法之要, 與時遷移, 應物變化, 立俗施事, 無所不宜, 指約而易操, 事少而功多" (Sima 1982). Daoism believes that all things can develop naturally under the fundamental principle of the existence of all things, i.e., Dao. When referring to the exercise of government, "The Dao in its regular course does nothing (for the sake of doing it), and so there is nothing which it does not do 道常無為而無不為" (*Dao De Jing* 道德經, 「正統道藏」本王弼註道德真經, chapter 37) (Legge 1891a). It needs to be noted that "wu-wei 無為" (non-action or effortless action) does not mean doing nothing but instead means not interfering unnecessarily with the natural development of things, which is actually "a wiser way of getting things done efficiently" (Ding and Yu 2022).

4.2.1. Attuning Oneself to Dao through Solitude

As the founder of Daoism, Lao Tzu (c. 571–471 B.C.) lived in the same era as Confucius, when society was in turmoil and people went after profit and avoided harm. Under such a social background, Lao Tzu saw that "active" politics could not bring stable development to society; so he put forward his own idea of "governing efficiently without exertion 無為而治", which is similar to Confucius' description of Shun 舜 (*The Analects* 論語, 「武英殿十三經注疏」本「論語注疏」, chapter "Duke Ling of Wei 衛靈公") (Legge 1861a). What needs to be emphasized again is that "wu-wei" is not doing nothing; on the contrary, Lao Tzu believed that the universe has its own Dao, and we should follow Dao, while excessive human intervention would adversely affect the appropriate operation of Dao. However, such a claim would not be easily accepted during the era of war and strife. Lao Tzu's Dao was not understood by most of his contemporaries. He explained the difficulty of being (rightly) known as follows: "My words are very easy to know, and very easy to practise; but there is no one in the world who is able to know and able to practise them. There is an originating and all-comprehending (principle) in my words, and an authoritative law for the things (which I enforce). It is because they do not know these, that men do not know me. They who know me are few, and I am on that account (the more) to be prized. It is thus that the sage wears (a poor garb of) hair cloth, while he carries his (signet of) jade in his bosom 吾言甚易知, 甚易行. 天下莫能知, 莫能行. 言有宗, 事有君. 夫唯無知, 是以不我知. 知我者希, 則我者貴. 是以聖人被褐而懷玉" (*Dao De Jing* 道德經, 「正統道藏」本王弼註道德真經, chapter 70) (Legge 1891a).

Lao Tzu once made a portrait of his being different from ordinary men, as follows: "The multitude of men look satisfied and pleased; as if enjoying a full banquet, as if mounted on a tower in spring. I alone seem listless and still, my desires having as yet given no indication of their presence. I am like an infant which has not yet smiled. I look dejected and forlorn, as if I had no home to go to. The multitude of men all have enough and to spare. I alone seem to have lost everything 眾人熙熙, 如享太牢, 如春登臺. 我獨怕兮其未兆; 如嬰兒之未孩; 儽儽兮若無所歸. 眾人皆有餘, 而我獨若遺" (*Dao De Jing* 道德經, 「正統道藏」本王弼註道德真經, chapter 20) (Legge 1891a). Here, Lao Tzu regards himself as a newborn baby, clean and pure, and indifferent to everything. According to Slingerland (2003, p. 92), while in the eyes of ordinary people the Laozian sage appears "dull" or "muddled", he in fact harbors the valuable gem of true insight into the Dao, i.e., "*ming* 明" (illumination). And it is also because he can maintain himself so that "All men have their spheres of action, while I alone seem dull and incapable, like

a rude borderer. (Thus) I alone am different from other men, but I value the nursing-mother (the Dao) 眾人皆有以, 而我獨頑似鄙. 我獨異於人, 而貴食母" (*Dao De Jing 道德經,「正統道藏」本王弼註道德真經*, chapter 20) (Legge 1891a). Lao Tzu has always been the pursuer of the "Dao of heaven," and in his philosophy, "Dao" is the "One," the "mother of all things 萬物之母", which does not depend or rely on anything else. When the world could not understand the Dao, Lao Tzu did not give up. Lao Tzu appears to be tired, depressed, and indifferent in contrast to others, when in fact he is not; he is emphasizing these opposites as a means of showing how different attunement to the Dao is (Austin 2010; Lau 1958). Lao Tzu may be solitary in his understanding and connection to the Dao among all people, but by being connected to the Dao, he would hardly feel lonely, since the Dao is that which gives birth to and forever connects everything.

Chuang Tzu (c. 369–286 B.C.), another representative of the Daoist school, lived in the Warring States period 戰國時期 (476–221 B.C.), which was more turbulent than the late Spring and Autumn period. Chuang Tzu thought that his contemporaries were sunk in stupidity and could not be talked to in a dignified style; therefore, he "employed the words of the cup of endless application, with important quotations to substantiate the truth, and an abundance of corroborative illustrations 以天下為沈濁, 不可與莊語; 以卮言為曼衍, 以重言為真, 以寓言為廣" (*Chuang Tzu 莊子,「續古逸叢書」本「南華真經」*, miscellaneous chapters 雜篇, chapter "Society 天下") (Legge 1891b). Chuang Tzu believed that to achieve absolute freedom, we need to mount on (the ether of) heaven and earth in its normal operation and drive along the changes of the six Qi 六氣 (i.e., Yin 陰, Yang 陽, Wind 風, Rain 雨, Gloom 晦, and Brightness 明) so that we can be free from the constraints of time and space, travel in the infinite realm, and not need to rely on any external things 若夫乘天地之正, 而御六氣之辯, 以遊無窮者, 彼且惡乎待哉 (*Chuang Tzu 莊子,「續古逸叢書」本「南華真經」*, Inner Chapters 內篇, chapter "Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease 逍遙遊") (Legge 1891b). If people were able to follow the nature of all things in the world and harness the changes of the six Qi, they could bring the fields of Qi that they were situated in into certain coherences, and they would surely feel and live in a deep connection with all Nature (Ivanhoe 1993; Raphals 2018; Turner 2021). Although such a person does not need to rely on external things, it does not necessarily imply that he or she sets himself or herself apart from others and experiences a sense of loneliness. Rather, "The Perfect man has no (thought of) self; the Spirit-like man, none of merit; the Sagely-minded man, none of fame 至人無己, 神人無功, 聖人無名" (*Chuang Tzu 莊子,「續古逸叢書」本「南華真經」*, Inner Chapters 內篇, chapter "Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease 逍遙遊") (Legge 1891b).

In *Chuang Tzu*, when the fairy Nu Yu 女偊, who had attained the Dao, was asked whether the Dao could be learned, she replied that, for Bu-liang Yi 卜梁倚, who had the abilities of a sagely man, but not the Dao, after banishing from his mind all worldly (matters), banishing from his mind all thoughts of men and things, and counting his life as foreign to himself, his mind was afterwards as clear as the morning, and then he was able to understand the Dao which relies on nothing; after that, he would be able to banish all thoughts of past or present, and then he could penetrate to (the truth that there is no difference between) life and death 吾猶守而告之, 參日而後能外天下; 已外天下矣, 吾又守之, 七日而後能外物; 已外物矣, 吾又守之, 九日而後能外生; 已外生矣, 而後能朝徹; 朝徹, 而後能見獨; 見獨, 而後能無古今; 無古今, 而後能入於不死不生 (*Chuang Tzu 莊子,「續古逸叢書」本「南華真經」*, Inner Chapters 內篇, chapter "The Great and Most Honoured Master 大宗師") (Legge 1891b).

For Chuang Tzu, the Dao is real and requires introspection by the subject, but such a process needs to be carried out in a quiet and undisturbed environment. He believes that there are too many desires in the secular world, and it is impossible to pursue the Dao when we are driven by desires. Therefore, only by staying away from this secular world, at least spiritually, can we calm down and enter into contemplation. In the eyes of Chuang Tzu's students and successors, Chuang Tzu "chiefly cared to occupy himself with the spirit-like operation of heaven and earth, and did not try to rise above the myriads of things. He did not condemn the agreements and differences of others, so that he might live in peace with the prevalent views 獨與天地精神往來, 而不敖倪於萬物. 不譴是非, 以與世俗處"

(*Chuang Tzu* 莊子，「續古逸叢書」本「南華真經」, miscellaneous chapters 雜篇, chapter "Society 天下") (Legge 1891b). Therefore, Chuang Tzu's teaching is indeed an antidote to loneliness: while the Daoist teachings advocate quiet and solitary meditation, Daoism is a doctrine of doing the inner work that allows one to attune oneself to the fundamentals of the world (Cohen and Bai 2019), through which one becomes more deeply engaged in and with the world.

4.2.2. The Practice of "Wu-Wei" and "Freedom"

What Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu pursued is the embracing of a larger world, and "wu-wei" is their Dao of confronting loneliness (see Table 1). When one is not understood by others, one does not have to force oneself to flow with others, and solitude could be beneficial in this respect. Lao Tzu took "Dao" as his life pursuit, regarding "Dao" as the law of the universe and the order that all things should follow. Chuang Tzu put himself in a solitary realm and conducted introspection in order to integrate himself with the Dao so that through the solitary state of mind he could break through the separation of the past and the present and the obstacles of life and death, transcend time, and achieve freedom in the experience of eternity (Hong 2012). The doctrine of Daoism was hardly compatible with the social background at that time; therefore, it was not well accepted by people. Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu eventually turned away from the earthly life spiritually. Regarding such "loneliness," Lao Tzu pursued "the Dao of heaven," and Chuang Tzu pursued "freedom," which showed their attitudes towards loneliness.

Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529 C.E.) of the Ming dynasty, whose theory integrated the ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, was deeply influenced by Daoism. As a famous scholar and a capable minister in governing the society, Wang Yangming has successfully become a man of virtue 立德, provided meritorious service to the country and citizens 立功, and expounded his ideas in writing 立言 so that he could be regarded as immortal. However, Wang Yangming's life was full of ups and downs. He enjoyed the prosperity of the capital city but also endured the desolation of the town Longchang 龍場. In the year 1506, he was demoted to Longchang for offending the powerful eunuch Liu Jin 劉瑾. The three years in Longchang might be the most lonely, isolated, and depressed time for Wang Yangming, but it was also under such circumstances that he was able to truly establish his own doctrine: In the process of becoming a saint, one only needs to look within oneself for strength and reason; one has everything within, without external demands; so it is wrong to seek the truth of things from outside, while the way for a sage to "seek the truth" is through "inner introspection" 聖人之道, 吾性自足, 向之求理於事物者誤也 (Wang 1992). Influenced by Daoism, Wang Yangming claimed that "there are many things in the world that seek glory but are turned to shame, and those that seek gain but are turned to loss 天下事, 往往多有求榮而反辱, 求得而反失者" (Wang 1992). In the ups and downs of officialdom, he managed to maintain his original intention. During the three years in Longchang, he was able to wisely confront his loneliness, find solace in Daoism, absorb and criticize Daoism, and finally find his own way of learning with the cultivation method of meditation, e.g., "attaining conscience 致良知," "the unity of knowledge and action 知行合一," and the doctrine that "the reason lies in one's heart 心即理".

In contemporary society, we can still selectively utilize the wisdom of Taoism according to our own life path. In a post-traumatic intervention for a Chinese who lost his son in the September 11 attack and later his wife from a sudden heart attack, the client felt extremely lonely and meaningless, always staying alone in his own room and refusing to go out. The counselor adopted the Daoistic orientation and told the client that "Blessing and suffering were only two sides of the same coin. Loss and calamity did not imply hopelessness and emptiness. They might also mean rebirth of life and meaningful sacrifice. In Lao Tzu's term, a bowl was useful only because it was empty, and a tree could survive when it was unsuitable to be timber" (Yip 2008). In this way, the counselor helped the client to make sense of his own loneliness in facing the loss of his family and to transform social

isolation into reflection on the meaning of life and recognize the need to treasure what he has in the present moment.

On the other hand, in a study of Singaporean adolescents' use of English metaphors to describe their switch of religion, "loneliness" was the third commonly used conceptual metaphor to describe Daoism, and Daoism was equated with an "unfriendly" and "lonely experience" (Chew 2010). Actually, Daoists generally believe that if we try to stand outside ourselves in the attempt at self-observation, then we will probably feel lonely and unhappy because in order to observe as such, we must see our "selves" as separate from other "selves," which will create many unnecessary and troublesome illusions; therefore, the goal of Daoism is not to obliterate the personal self but to focus on the greater whole and perceive oneself as a part of the Dao cosmic way (Danylova 2017; Malivskyi 2017). It is also important to clarify that solitude is not necessarily negative since it provides an occasion through which people can realize their true selves. For Chuang Tzu, while being solitary and focusing firmly on our life goals, we can become "Kun 鯤" (enormous legendary fish, which could change into a roc) or "Peng 鵬" (roc, mythical bird of prey having enormous size and strength), instead of small insects such as "Cicadas 蜩" or small birds such as "Little Doves 學鳩" (*Chuang Tzu 莊子*，／續古逸叢書／ 本／南華真經／, chapter "Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease 逍遙遊") (Legge 1891b). Therefore, people can become independent and accomplished by being themselves, even though they may fail to obtain the understanding and approval from others.

4.3. Buddhist Wisdom

Buddhism also pays close attention to loneliness (see Table 1). Śūnyatā is one of Mahāyāna Buddhism's fundamental concepts. While typically translated as "emptiness," śūnyatā denotes the fact that all existents are "empty" of any essence and that everything is dependently originated (Arnold 2021; Moore 1995). Buddhism takes "meditation" as one of its main cultivation methods. In terms of background, the development of the yoga techniques of meditation is "one of the most unique of all the contributions of primordial India to the spiritual life of Hinduism and the world" (Berry 1996, p. 9). In *Yoga śikha Upanishad 瑜伽頂奧義書*, yoga as a method of practice is related to reincarnation in the theory of life; that is, human sins still exist even after thousands of years of reincarnation, but only through the practice of yoga can one reduce one's sins and stop reincarnation 千世再轉生, 無由銷罪孽, 獨以瑜伽見, 輪回從此絕 (Xu 1995, p. 882). This method of yoga practice requires the practitioner to attain a certain state of mind through the honing of the physical body under extremely difficult environmental conditions.

As currently a prevalent means of health care and recreation, yoga was referred to as early as the first millennium B.C. in a close relationship with Sāṃkhya, although "the Yoga tradition developed also with a certain independence as an integral spiritual discipline and way of salvation" (Berry 1996, p. 110). Sāṃkhya philosophy sticks to two fundamental principles, i.e., spirit (purusa) and material nature (prakrti), and the ultimate goal of Sāṃkhya-Yoga, as described both by Sāṃkhya and by Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras 瑜伽經*, is 'aloneness' (kaivalya), "portrayed as each individual spirit separating itself from material nature in its true form as pure consciousness, which most closely resembles the teachings of Jain philosophy, more than it does Buddhism or Hindu Vedanta" (Nicholson 2013). It is therefore of great importance that we should avoid conflating Sāṃkhya-Yoga with Buddhist meditation. While the mainstream tradition of Hindu and Jain meditation seeks to avoid karma with the self-mortificatory asceticism practice of "fasting, restraining the mind and stopping the breath," the Buddhist meditation, in contrast, advocates that one should perform the Four Dhyānas (i.e., afflicted dhyāna, wrathful dhyāna, pious dhyāna, and pure dhyāna) and "remain equanimous in the face of the experiences they offer" (Bronkhorst [1993] 2000, p. 31). In particular, when comparing the Buddhist Four Dhyānas with the non-Buddhist meditation, a difference that is emphasized in the original *Mahāsaccaka Sūtra 薩遮迦大經* is that "Buddhist meditation is a pleasant experience, accompanied by joy (pīti) and bliss

(sukha), or bliss alone, in all but its highest stages, whereas non-Buddhist meditation is not described as pleasurable" ([Bronkhorst [1993] 2000](), p. 26).

4.3.1. Loneliness as the Noble Truth of Suffering

After six years of asceticism in the forest, Prince Siddhartha (c. 563–483 B.C.) did not obtain the truth of life. Therefore, he replaced Yoga asceticism with meditation. After the Enlightenment, through forty-nine days and nights of meditation beneath the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya in Bihar, Prince Siddhartha became the Buddha. The Buddhism he founded believes that the whole human world is full of various desires, and it is because of the unfulfilled desires that suffering arises; therefore, Buddhism has established a series of precepts aimed at keeping people away from the source of suffering. As the secular world is full of desires and "ordinary people can neither recognize the nature of the world nor get rid of the so-called 'ignorance 無明,' the ignorant person is full of desires in secular life, which is directly related to the formation of suffering" ([Yao 2021]()). Therefore, the Buddhist meditation requires practitioners to practice in a state mentally or spiritually divorced from goings-on in the secular world, although this does not necessarily imply physically renouncing or leaving the world ([Bronkhorst [1993] 2000](), pp. 78–127). According to Buddhism, the conventional way of life filled with defilements is overall not suitable for the pursuit of truth, as stated in the first volume of the *Dirghagama-Sūtra* 長阿含經, 「大正新修大藏經」: "The human world is so chaotic and noisy that it is not suitable for self-cultivation. Only when one leaves such a noisy human world can one seek the true path in a place of tranquility 人間憒鬧, 此非我宜. 何時當得離此群眾, 閑靜之處以求道真" ([Chen 2020]()).

After having found the correct method of practice, the Buddha formulated the Four Noble Truths (四聖諦), namely the truth of suffering (Dukkha 苦諦), the truth of the cause of suffering (Samudaya 集諦), the truth of the cessation of suffering (Nirodha 滅諦), and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering (Magga 道諦). The Buddha believed that people were full of suffering due to their desires or cravings; therefore, they should practice away from the human world to eliminate this source of suffering and eventually reach the ultimate goal of "Nirvana." When cravings, hatred (or aversion), and delusion (or ignorance) are all extinguished forever, all suffering will also cease and people will then arrive at the state of "Nirvana" 貪欲永盡, 瞋恚永盡, 愚癡永盡, 一切諸煩惱永盡, 是名涅槃. All in all, in order to achieve nirvana, Buddhism proposes that people should stay away from or avoid the earthly world, at least in a purely metaphoric/spiritual sense (see Table [1]()).

Buddhism regards all desires as "empty." In the "Examination of the Four Noble Truths" of *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā 中观论)*, "the second Buddha" Nagarjuna 龍樹菩薩 (c. 150–250 C.E.) claimed that "Whatever is dependently arisen is explained to be emptiness. Its existence is imputed in dependence upon something else, and this is the path of the Middle Way 因緣所生法, 我說即是空, 亦為是假名, 亦是中道義." The insight of the Middle Way's teachings is that emptiness does not mean complete nothingness; it means dependent origination, and whatever is dependently arisen is empty of its own essence; therefore, for everything in samsara and nirvana, everything in the dream, or every inner and outer phenomenon, since they are dependently arisen, they are also empty ([Gyamtso 2003](), pp. 155–59).

Therefore, Buddhism encourages people to approach solitude, which is not a complete self-isolation. Nevertheless, the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng 惠能 (638–713 C.E.) advocates the seeking of liberation and enlightenment within this world, which is quite different from the ideas of the previous patriarchs, "whose focus were mainly on the pursuit of enlightenment through solitary practice", as we mentioned above ([Jai 2020]()). In the *Platform Sūtra 壇經* (Tsungpao (*Zongbao 宗寶*) edition), it is claimed by the Sixth Patriarch that, "The Dharma is within the world. Apart from this world there is no awakening. Seeking Bodhi outside the world is like looking for rabbit horns 佛法在世間, 不離世間覺, 離世覓菩提, 恰如求兔角" ([Pine 2006]()).

4.3.2. The Practice of "Mindfulness" and "Spiritual Realization"

Buddhism was introduced into China via the Silk Road around the 1st century C.E., and then, it was localized in order to better spread in China. The localization of Buddhism had a far-reaching impact on the Chinese scholars at that time. Ancient Chinese scholars were able to find new spiritual support through the influence of Buddhist thoughts after being frustrated in their lives and careers. For example, Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842 C.E.), the famous minister, writer, and philosopher in the Tang Dynasty, sometimes titled the Heroic Poet 詩豪, was demoted after the Yongzhen Reform 永貞革新, but he did not fall down because of his personal situation. On the contrary, he saw hope in Buddhism. He wrote that "Confucianism uses the middle way to regulate all living beings, and rarely talks about life, so it does not work when the world is in decline. Buddhism, on the other hand, uses the image of great compassion to save all living beings and spread the view of karma, so when the world is in chaos, its role becomes more prominent 儒以中道禦群生, 罕言性命, 故世衰而寖息; 佛以大慈救諸苦, 廣啟因業, 故劫濁而益尊" ([Liu 1990](), p. 57), which well illustrated the difference between Confucianism and Buddhism.

Wang Wei 王維 (c. 701–761 C.E.), an important poet and painter of the Tang Dynasty, sometimes titled the Poet Buddha 詩佛, was also famously influenced a lot by Buddhism. When he was dissatisfied with the reality, he chose to get away from the world to practice Buddhism. Most of his poems are Chan-inspired, depicting his quiet life after he got away from the secular world, such as "When the monks recite the sūtras in the morning, the mountains and forests are not yet dawned, and when they meditate in the evening, the mountains are even more silent 朝梵林未曙, 夜禪山更寂" ([Wang 2020](), p. 196). Through writing about the monks' daily homework, the "silence" here well reflects Wang Wei's life scene far away from the secular world. The monks rose early and stayed up till dark to practice meditation and chant sūtras, but in the poet's view, these monks did not live a dull life because they respected their own affairs and enjoyed themselves, and their spiritual world was very fulfilling. While Buddhism gave Wang Wei a place to repose after his troubled career, he was still lonely, which could be shown to some degree in his verses that "When I was interested, I often went to play alone. When I was happy, I was also self-appreciative and self-indulged 興來每獨往, 勝事空自知" ([Wang 2020](), p. 149). In the intentional seeking of solitude for repose, Wang Wei actually found his way of adapting to aloneness. Buddhist wisdom could help people think and reflect, and it is when people are away from the distractions of the secular world that they can better meditate and hopefully achieve enlightenment.

It is noteworthy that [Weiss]() ([1973]()) distinguishes between two types of loneliness experienced by adults, i.e., emotional isolation and social isolation, and "the loneliness of emotional isolation is initiated by the absence of a close emotional attachment." Attachment implies the personal deficiency and the dependency on others ([Kirkpatrick 1992](); [Simpson et al. 2003]()). From the attachment perspective, loneliness is indicative of "poor-quality relationships in which people feel a lack of intimacy and emotional closeness as well as feel unloved, unaccepted, not sufficiently cared for, misunderstood, or unvalidated by a relationship partner" ([Mikulincer and Shaver 2013]()). According to the Noble Truth of Suffering, such attachment, craving, or desire would certainly cause suffering, which is the feeling of loneliness in our case. In fact, it is advocated by [Shonin and Van Gordon]() ([2014]()) that all of the teachings of the original Buddhist sūtras and the essence of tantric writings by the likes of Longchenpa emphasize "the importance of not relying for our happiness on the company of other people or material possessions," because each of us comes into this world all alone, and the only thing we can take with us when we leave this world is "the spiritual awareness that we have managed to cultivate whilst we were alive," which then implies that "spiritual realization is really the only reliable friendship that we have the possibility of cultivating." If we can "encounter and then be bathed by the company of our own spiritual awareness", we will not easily feel lonely, but will feel absolutely grounded, unequivocally alive, and profoundly peaceful, because unlike any other kind of companionship, "this friendship that we start to make with ourselves is completely un-

conditional" (Shonin and Van Gordon 2014). In this manner, "spiritual realization" would be the Buddhist answer for the management of loneliness, which is not only valuable but also reliable.

More recently, Buddhist wisdom, such as the "right mindfulness" of the Noble Eightfold Path, has been used a lot to alleviate loneliness and improve social connectedness (Baminiwatta and Solangaarachchi 2021; Creswell et al. 2012; Lindsay et al. 2019). While mindfulness is clearly derived from Buddhism originally, it has now taken on a life of its own in the secular world (Mikulas 2011; Purser and Milillo 2015). That is to say, there are many people who practice mindfulness without being Buddhists, and there are also many Buddhists who do not practice mindfulness (Shonin and Van Gordon 2015; Wilson 2016). Mindfulness as a non-religious practice has proved to be as relevant and beneficial to non-Buddhist practitioners as to those who have placed their faith in the Buddha and his Dhamma (Bodhi 2016; Mattes 2019).

According to Shonin and Van Gordon (2014), loneliness has less to do with us being without the friendship or affection of others and more to do with us not being mindful of our true and ultimate nature; therefore, searching for companionship is not a solution to loneliness but generally tends to keep us eternally distracted in order to avoid having to confront loneliness at its source. Instead, we should be courageous enough to explore the seemingly empty voidness that exists within our own being, to become aware of and relax into this "empty space" by practicing mindfulness of not only our thoughts and mental processes but also of the empty space that exists between each individual thought (Shonin and Van Gordon 2014). Furthermore, in a systematic review and meta-analysis of 92 articles on mindfulness-based intervention (MBI), it was found that MBI with an average length of an 8-week duration significantly improved the population's loneliness level with no mental health issue, although the overall quality of the evidence (GRADE: Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development, and Evaluation) was low (Teoh et al. 2021).

5. Discussion

People typically feel lonely when they perceive a deficiency in the quality or quantity of their social relationships (Macdonald and Hülür 2021; Mund et al. 2020). In the information era, although the rapid development of the information network and the fast spread of social media are advertised as promoting the establishment of the global village, which aims to strengthen the relationship between people and reduce the barriers to communication, what many people really feel is more profound loneliness and emptiness (Darcin et al. 2016). Despite the popularity of social networks and technologies that intend to enhance social interaction, more Americans are found to feel lonely now than before (Wang et al. 2012). In recent years, with researchers' more comprehensive investigation of loneliness, the problem of loneliness has become one of the most serious issues in contemporary society, and includes, for example, the mental health of the empty-nest elderly (Su et al. 2012; Zhang et al. 2019), and the physical and mental development of left-behind children (Guo et al. 2012; He et al. 2012). Young people living alone are particularly found to have a certain sense of loneliness (Jamieson and Simpson 2013; Yeung and Cheung 2015).

At present, during the special period of the COVID-19 pandemic, some people are physically or socially isolated because of the need for epidemic prevention and control. Although the measures of quarantine can be of great help to combat the epidemic, living in closed isolation for days or even months can have a certain negative impact on the quarantined person's physical and mental health (Jin et al. 2021; Kaparounaki et al. 2020). While moderate loneliness or solitude can be used as a means to improve people's ability, excessive loneliness could lead to mental disease, and one of its serious consequences is the decline of cognitive ability and the increase in the dementia risk (Moyle et al. 2011; Rafnsson et al. 2020). Therefore, the issue of how to properly treat and cope with loneliness is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When people are lonely for a long period of time, they will feel that they are on the edge of the world and not included in the world. They cannot feel cared for by society

and others around them; therefore, they live in their own small world, which may gradually affect their correct perception of themselves. As the most prominent philosophical or religious schools shared by major East Asian societies, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism have different views on loneliness (see Table 1). Confucianism takes "entering into the world" as its active pursuit in order to make a difference in society; Daoism takes "wu-wei" as its own method of practice, leading a life of few desires and ambitions in order to attain the Dao; Buddhism pursues the cessation of suffering through the Noble Eightfold Path, particularly by mindfulness.

Confucianists generally believe that individuals should place themselves among all things in heaven and earth in order to pursue common development with others and with nature. Therefore, Confucianism proposes to actively enter into the world, to participate in society, and to pursue the harmonious coexistence between themselves and the world. The most prominent expression of this proposal comes from the founder of the Guan School 關學 of neo-Confucianism, i.e., Zhang Zai's 張載 (1020–1077 C.E.) famous "Four Sentences of Hengqu 橫渠四句", which lay out the four life goals for himself and the other Chinese intellectuals: "To establish the heart for heaven and earth, to establish the life for living people, to inherit the past saints' unique and lost knowledge, and to initiate peace and security for all ages 為天地立心, 為生民立命, 為往聖繼絕學, 為萬世開太平" (Zhang 2019). That is, we should establish a set of moral value systems for human society, with benevolence, filial piety, rites, and music as the core so that people can make the right choices, thus mastering their own destiny and giving meaning to their lives; we should also inherit the knowledge of Confucius and Mencius and other sages in the past and open up a foundation of permanent peace for the world and future generations (Lin 2020).

The "Four Sentences of Hengqu" have well synthesized Confucius' thought of "benevolence," Mencius' conception of "establishing ones Heaven-ordained being 立命" (*Mencius 孟子, 「武英殿十三經注疏」本「孟子注疏」*, chapter "Exerting One's Heart/Mind to the Utmost-Part I 盡心-上") (Legge 1861b), and Zhang Zai's own idea that "All people are our brothers and sisters, and all things are our companions 民胞物與" (Zhang 2019). The benevolent people love human beings and all things in nature at the same time. As people will feel solitary or lonely when being physically, socially, or mentally distanced, isolated or excluded by others, in response they can enlarge their social networks by reaching out to people outside of their previous social networks, and even animals could be included, which may partly explain why pet ownership can help reduce people's feeling of loneliness and improve their health status (Banks and Banks 2002; Zasloff and Kidd 1994). It is claimed that "the most important characteristic of Confucianism should be its gregariousness and wholeness, where the family, patriarchal clan and country are more important than individual human beings," and that Confucianism can "soothe an individual's loneliness and transcend death by integrating the ethical framework" (Gao 2012). In summary, Confucianism encourages people to integrate into the collective and calls on people to develop to their best through their harmonious coexistence with others.

Numerous historical facts and empirical research have shown that loneliness and solitude could have both negative and positive effects (Buchholz and Catton 1999; Cacioppo et al. 2006; Svendsen 2017). In the state of being alone, we can better decide what we want and like to do without caring too much about others' opinions. Take Lao Tzu as an example. The Dao that he pursued was not understood by others at his time, but he was still firm in his doctrine. Therefore, he created his own independent philosophical doctrine in an ideal world that may run counter to the secular values. In society at that time, only Daoists were able to put forward the dialectical thoughts that all things in the world are interdependent to each other (Li 2016). Even Buddhism, which spiritually avoids the world, does not require complete separation from the secular world, because "Bodhi is among all things in the world 佛法在世間." During the localization of Buddhism in China, more and more people found that they could not genuinely obtain the truth of Buddhism by studying the sūtras alone, but rather, they needed to start practicing it in their daily lives. So

far as we know, no religions actually require people to isolate themselves completely from the external world.

More importantly, if we can make better use of loneliness and solitude, they will do us more good than harm (Alberti 2019; Thompson 2021). In the contemporary society that is full of complex information, many people are having problems in being themselves. With the popularity of the "996" (i.e., working 6 days a week from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.) work culture (Bao 2022; Wang 2020), the widespread existence of internet celebrity culture (Dippner 2018; Juntiwasarakij 2018), and the "filter bubbles" or "information cocoons" in social media (Min 2019; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2016), it is difficult for many people to realize and maintain their true selves, while loneliness and solitude may be useful in order to appropriately develop an independent self and become a real person.

Last but not least, with respect to the methodology of our paper writing, although comparative philosophy is an instance of a sound and sensible strategy for doing philosophy, oversimplifications, the over-use of external resources, excessively stark contrasts, and illicit assimilations count as the most frequent sins in doing comparative philosophy (Mou 2007; Wong 2020). Therefore, we need to beware of a tendency to essentialize the three traditions in terms of slogans that can easily be assimilated but that risk reducing the inherent complexity of the traditions being studied, since each of the traditions is a complex whole which can potentially encompass a variety of perspectives (Chimakonam and Chimakonam 2022; Weber 2014). Through taking a constructive- engagement strategy of comparative philosophy, our paper focuses on interpreting or elaborating one specific aspect or dimension, i.e., the loneliness-related concepts and ideas of the three traditions, instead of giving a comprehensive historical description of them, and the simplification *per se* is then not doomed to be indiscriminately a sin of over-simplification (Mou 2010). Nevertheless, we should remind our readers that our interpretation of the three traditions in this paper is to help discuss the current issue of loneliness, which is different from the three traditions' original focuses and contexts. While we should certainly take care to avoid oversimplifications in committing or interpreting the claims made in comparative studies such as ours (Raju 2007, p. viii), the readers should also take care and should keep in mind the limitations and boundaries of our work.

6. Conclusions

Loneliness is a condition in which people feel that they are physically, socially, or mentally distanced and isolated or excluded. Lonely people usually perceive the absence of place-belongingness, a deficiency in the quality or quantity of their social relationships. While there are various causes and effects of loneliness, during the COVID-19 pandemic loneliness as a result of the social distancing protocols enacted to slow or prohibit the spread of COVID-19 has brought various physical and mental issues. Through analyzing how Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism understand and treat loneliness, we can see that they generally hold a more or less dialectical attitude towards loneliness and solitude (see Table 1). For Confucianism, harmony is everything, which not only means the harmony with oneself, but also the harmony with others in society. Therefore, we can see that the latter Confucianists' response to their loneliness in difficult situations is not escaping from the secular world but still trying to connect with others and realize their social aspirations when they have a chance to. It is claimed by Daoism and Buddhism that through meditation and mindfulness, people can actually take advantage of the isolation from others and focus more on themselves, especially on their spirituality, so that they can get closer to the Dao and be more likely to obtain the Bodhi.

All in all, only by understanding loneliness comprehensively can we better manage or alleviate loneliness wisely, and the three traditions that we have discussed are undoubtedly valuable and inspiring in helping us to address the current challenges brought by loneliness. Although the loneliness under the COVID-19 restrictions certainly has its distinct triggers or causes, we do not consider it as something "very unique." As suggested by the previous theoretical and empirical research, loneliness in different contexts shares

similar characteristics and can be identified and treated in similar ways. In this paper, we basically propose that through learning from the ancient wisdom of the three traditions, we can better cope with loneliness both theoretically and methodologically: theoretically, we have indicated how the approaches of "entering into the world," "attuning oneself to Dao through solitude," and regarding "loneliness as the Noble Truth of Suffering" can be of help in making sense of and dealing with the feeling of loneliness (see Sections 4.1.1, 4.2.1 and 4.3.1); methodologically, by resorting to famous historical figures, we have also illustrated how to put the aforementioned theories into practice through "benevolence and rites," "wu-wei and freedom," and "mindfulness and spiritual realization" (see Sections 4.1.2, 4.2.2 and 4.3.2), which is perfectly in line with the principle of "philosophy as a way of life" in contemporary philosophical practice (Ding 2016; Hadot 1995).

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