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What Is Taoism?

"Taoism" refers to a religious and philosophical system that promotes holistic well-being and ritual mastery of the spirit world. Taoism is often contrasted with Confucianism, but it is better to think of Taoism and Confucianism as two aspects of a single religious tradition; Chinese themselves, throughout the centuries, have regarded Taoism and Confucianism in complementary terms. Taoism arose in China, but now can be said to be a "world religion," with adherents in Europe and America as well as in East Asia.

Until recent years, the Western encounter with Taoism was focused on the literary and philosophical tradition of the Zhou Dynasty, the same period in which Confucius and the early Confucians Mengzi and Xunzi lived. This tradition was associated with the writings of a "hermit intellectual" named Zhuangzi (莊子) in a book by the same name and with the writings of a "wise sage" named Laozi (老子) in a book attributed to him and known by the title *Daodejing* (道德經). For many decades, Western knowledge was limited to these books in English translation, and the entire rich history of religious institutions, rituals, and individual practice of Taoism was all but ignored. This situation has been rectified, and, for the past 25 to 30 years, the study of Chinese religions has been focused, quite rightly, on the history of Taoism over its two millennia of development and elaboration.

Scholars have been divided on the issue of how to relate the "philosophy" of the early sages with the "religion" of the ritual tradition; even in Chinese, they are referred to differently, as *Daojia* (道家, the "school" of the Tao) and *Daojiao* (道教, the "religion" of the Tao). Simply for purposes of organization, the present book will treat these two aspects sequentially; but it should be understood that they are interpenetrating. Both the *Daodejing* and the *Book of Zhuangzi* anticipate the subsequent religious tradition, and this tradition, in turn, refers back to the early sages with reverence, deifying Laozi as "Lord Lao."

Asian Religions: A Cultural Perspective, First Edition. Randall L. Nadeau.

Still, historians cannot find evidence for a fully developed Taoist religion at the time of the early books, and so it makes sense to treat them separately here.

We should remind ourselves, as we did in Chapter 1, that the words and names that we employ to describe Asian religions all originated in the West – they appeared first in English, German, or French, and they were translated into Chinese and Japanese only later. So the labels we use – "religion," "philosophy," even "Confucianism" and "Taoism" – are Western inventions, imposed upon Chinese culture to make sense of its history in familiar terms. "Taoism" is an especially amorphous name, and I have intentionally retained the traditional English spelling "Taoism," as opposed to the preferred Romanization today ("Daoism"), in order to underscore the fact that the designation is not indigenous to China. It is not autochthonous, to use a scientific term, and "Taoism" is not an autonym – it is not a word used by Chinese to describe their religion. In fact I can say that I have never met a Chinese who identified him- or herself as a "Taoist" or as a "Confucian," except in very special circumstances.

Not only are the Taoist religion and Taoist philosophy difficult to differentiate; so, too, are Taoism and Confucianism. The use of these names should not suggest two completely distinct entities. At the elite, intellectual levels of Chinese culture, members of the scholar–gentry class were as likely to cite the Taoist classics as the "Four Books" of Confucianism, and they incorporated both Taoist and Confucian modes of living into their daily lives. At the level of popular culture, the same was and remains true: enter any community temple and you will find both traditions represented without differentiation – an image of the deified Laozi next to placards promoting social harmony, righteousness, and other Confucian virtues; ritual practices that borrow from both traditions; and temple talks citing both Taoist philosophy and Confucian learning.

Confucianism and Taoism interpenetrate to such an extent that it is more accurate to describe them as a single "Chinese religion." Notably, in the Chinese case, there is no one word parallel to "Hinduism" – a label simply designating the "religion" (in fact, religions) of the people of India. Just as the word "Hinduism" suggests a false unity in India, the words "Confucianism" and "Taoism" are equally misleading in that they suggest a conceptual separation in Chinese religious thought and practice.

As for Buddhism, the third of the "great religions" of China, another abstraction can be made, and this book will treat Buddhism (including its Indian, Chinese, and Japanese forms) as a separate entity in Parts V and VI. In China's case this is acceptable, as the culture itself has tended to perceive Buddhism as a discrete entity. It is the only one of the three traditions that was not indigenous to China, and it arrived relatively late in Chinese history – in the first century CE. Certainly Taoist and Buddhist institutions – temples, abbeys/monasteries,

and so on – are readily distinguishable. But, once again, there is no doubt that scholar–gentry and contemporary intellectuals fully embrace Buddhism as part of a single cultural tradition and that common folk fully incorporate elements of all three forms into their lives. We can only say that the demarcations presented in this book are heuristic devices – useful for thinking, but highly inaccurate at the level of everyday belief and practice.

With these cautions in mind, we can now turn to the organization of this part of the book and to the topics we will explore under the general rubric of "Taoism."

After some introductory notes in Chapter 8, Chapter 9 summarizes the principal themes of the two great classics of Taoist philosophy: the *Book of Zhuangzi* and the *Daodejing*. These texts are the ones best known to generations of Western students of Taoism, and they still are of major significance to Taoism as a global religious phenomenon.

Chapters 10 to 12 discuss three dimensions of religious Taoism, employing yin–yang cosmology as the organizing principle: the temporal, the spatial, and the personal.

Chapter 13 examines Taoism as a global religion and its contemporary relevance to the twenty-first century.

Philosophical Taoism

The phrase "philosophical Taoism" is usually applied simply to the ideas presented in the Taoist classics of the pre-Han period, especially the *Book of Zhuangzi* and the *Daodejing*. In the following chapter we will look at the major themes of these two works; but, since so much has been written and speculated about their authorship, we should begin with a brief look at the history of the texts themselves.

The *Daodejing* is usually given first billing as the seminal text of the Taoist tradition, and several scholars have claimed that it is the most translated text in human history, outnumbering even the translations of the Bible. This is a somewhat deceptive claim – the *Daodejing* is certainly not as widely read as the Bible – but the sheer number of different translations attests both to its worldwide popularity and to its impenetrability: it is an extraordinarily abstruse work. Here are a few translations just of the first sentence of the first chapter: 道可道非常道 (*Dao ke dao fei chang dao*).

- "The tao that can be described is not the eternal Tao." *J. H. McDonald*
- "The Way that can be told of is not an unvarying Way." *Arthur Waley*
- "The Tao that can be followed is not the eternal Tao." *Charles Muller*
- "The Way that can be experienced is not true." *Peter Merel*

- "The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao." *James Legge*
- "Even the finest teaching is not the Tao itself." *Stan Rosenthal*
- "What we call 'The Dao' is not the Dao forever." *Randall Nadeau*

Multiply this perplexity at least by the number of the book's chapters (81), and you can get some idea of its "mysterious power" (to use a phrase employed in the book itself, 玄德, *xuan-de*, to describe the Dao).

Of "Laozi" himself, the purported author of the *Daodejing*, the only thing that can be said with any certainty is that no such person ever existed or put the *Daodejing* into writing. Legends began to circulate as early as the fourth century BCE of an extraordinarily wise sage, born at the age of 81 (hence his name *Laozi*, 老子, "Old Infant"), who so disdained the world's ways that he mounted an ox and retired to the barbarian reaches of the West.

This was not before meeting up with Confucius, whom Laozi called a "dead branch." (Their meeting is depicted in Figure 8.1.) According to the legendary biography of the Taoist master, Confucius asked Laozi about the *li* (禮) and was so impressed by the Old Infant's enigmatic responses that he described him as a "soaring dragon."

As he departed from the Middle Kingdom through a mountain pass, Laozi deigned to share his wisdom in a text of 5,000 characters – another name for the *Daodejing* in Chinese is the *wuqianzi jing* (五千字經), "the 5,000-character classic" – expounding the Way (道, *Dao*) and its Power (德, *De*). To compound the legend even further, Taoists of the fifth and sixth centuries CE claimed that

Figure 8.1 Statue depicting the legendary meeting between Confucius and Laozi. Photo taken by the author at Qingyuan shan (清源山), Fujian Province (June 2009).

Laozi ended up in India, where he "transformed himself" into none other than Śākyamuni Buddha and "converted the barbarians" to Taoism! This legend arose during a period of intense Buddhist–Taoist rivalry in China, but it is still repeated today, being used now to promote the underlying harmony and compatibility of the two traditions.

These are certainly fantastical stories, with no bearing in reality. Moreover, the *Daodejing* itself – as it is currently known and has most often been translated – dates to no earlier than the third century CE, some 500 to 1,000 years after the Sage supposedly lived. However, fragments of the text have been discovered in recent years at burial sites in Mawangdui and Guodian, China – these fragments date to the second and fourth centuries BCE. Though incomplete, the fragments do indicate the existence of a collection of aphorisms that can be attributed to the collective memory of a group of wise persons or elders, who passed on their wisdom orally until some of their sayings were written down, on silk or bamboo strips, well before the time of Confucius. One scholar sees in the name "Laozi" a hint of this collective authorship, translating the name as "The Elders."[1]

More can be said with certainty of Zhuangzi. He did exist, and though the writings attributed to him were substantially written by others, they contain plenty of biographical information. As part of the educated elite, Zhuangzi was well versed in the philosophical traditions of his day. He cites Laozi (7 times, all in the Outer Chapters) as well as Confucius (3 times in the Inner Chapters, 15 times in the Outer Chapters, 13 times in the Miscellaneous Chapters): he certainly allied himself with the former and distinguished himself from the latter. One of the most amusing features of the *Book of Zhuangzi* (as much a book of humor as anything else) is the use of a character named "Confucius" as a Taoist teacher who often says things that Confucius himself would have found abhorrent. Despite his own intellectual attainments, Zhuangzi saw no value in book learning or formal education and rebelled against conventional social norms. He was a "noble recluse," the first in a line of many such figures in Chinese history that extends even to the present day. The *Book of Zhuangzi* reflects an aesthetic sensitivity that celebrates rebelliousness, intuitive insight, mysticism, and irrationality. We will explore these themes in detail in Chapter 9.

Yin–Yang Cosmology

Though the cosmological system of yin and yang originated with the Book of Changes (易經, *Yijing*, conventionally Romanized as *I Ching*) before the Common Era, it was not fully developed until the Song Dynasty (eleventh century CE). From that point on it became a foundational symbol of religious Taoism.

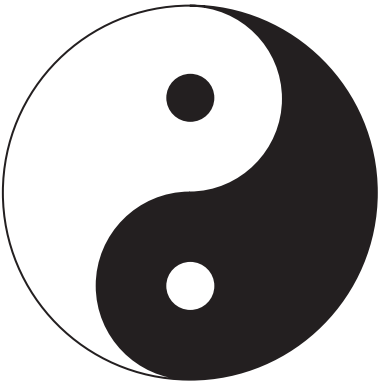

Figure 8.2 Taiji tu (太極圖), "Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate."

Etymologically related to darkness and light, yin and yang represent balanced interpenetrating states of being and potentiality, which are always described in Taoism in dynamic terms: ever moving, ever revolving, ever circulating. Yin represents receptivity, stillness, and regression; yang represents activity, movement, and aggression. Yin is identified with women or with feminine attributes; yang is identified with men or with masculine attributes. Within Chinese religion Taoism is yin-oriented, Confucianism is yang-oriented. However, as the often replicated Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate illustrates (Figure 8.2), these forces are not seen to be in conflict with one another, but rather exist in a complementary relationship; that is to say, one cannot exist without the other. Humans should strive to preserve the two forces in equal measure in their social interactions, in the natural environment, and in their physical selves.

To the extent that social life and the values favored by the Confucian tradition reward the yang attributes of activity and aggression, the Taoist tradition has tended to favor the yin qualities of stillness and receptivity. As a counterbalancing force to the socially dominant Confucian tradition, both philosophical and religious Taoism favor yin over yang. Traditionally, these qualities have been associated with women, and in both theory and practice Taoism has promoted feminine attributes and women's power. The *Daodejing* is especially clear about upholding feminine qualities, and it likens the Dao to a cosmic mother. Within the Taoist religion priestly functions were shared equally between men and women, and even today Taoist abbeys recruit both male and female practitioners. Community temples also feature powerful gods and goddesses, from the imperial Wang Ye (王爺, a collective name for a number of gods) to Mazu (媽祖, goddess of the sea), the Eternal Venerable Mother (無生老母, *Wusheng laomu*),

and the Queen Mother of the West (西王母, *Xiwangmu*). We will explore these themes further in the following chapters.

Note

1 Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).