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DAOISM (TAOISM)

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Indigenous Chinese philosophical-religious system that emerged in the dying years of the Zhou (Chou) dynasty; subsequently evolving into diverse schools and sects; significantly influenced Chinese BUDDHISM* and NEO-CONFUCIANISM*. The Chinese generally classify the diverse variations of Daoism within two broad categories: *Daojia* (Philosophical Daoism) and *Daojiao* (Religious Daoism). Both *Daojia* and *Daojiao* are closely intertwined and do not represent incompatible alternatives, as early 20th century Western scholars once thought.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF DAOISM

Dao (Tao). Within Chinese cosmology, the *Dao* may be defined as the matrix of all dynamic actualities and potentialities. It encompasses all actualities that are existing and all possibilities that could happen, but exclude all impossibilities. It is a dynamic ontology which simultaneously embodies both “being” and “non-being” in constant, cyclical and evolutionary flux of production and destruction, rather than a static, once-for-all production. Daoists understand the *Dao* as the unnameable ultimate reality that defies all attempts at categorization. It is the source for everything that existed, exists and will exist.

Yin-yang. In Chinese cosmology, yin-yang are two opposite but complementary energies that make manifest and differentiate the “myriad things” (*wan wu*) that emerge into existence from the undifferentiated, primordial *Dao*. The popular symbol of *yin-yang* reveals the cyclical nature of the Chinese worldview – life undergoes cycles of production and destruction. The dynamic interaction of yin and yang give rise to cycles of production and destruction, from which the universe and its diverse forms of life (*wan wu*) emerge. At the height of the cycle of production of one phase, and before the cycle of destruction begins, the seeds for the next cycle of production of the complementary phase emerge. From the constant intermingling of yin and yang, the “Five Elements” (*wu xing*) of water, fire, wood, metal and earth emerge, which in turn gives rise to myriads of forms, history and time. Chinese-Daoist cosmological thought maps all phenomena in pairs of bipolar complementary opposites according to the yin-yang matrix, e.g., male-female, odd-even, active-passive, sun-moon, hot-cool, production-destruction, etc.

Reversion. Daoists also emphasize *reversion*, viz., all things ultimately revert to their primordial, original tranquil state of equilibrium – the *Dao* itself. In Daoist cosmology, once the potentiality of the *Dao* is realized into actuality in various forms of “myriad things” (*wan wu*), it cuts off other potentialities. Therefore, reversion to the *Dao* means to break free of the mundane world to enjoy the unbounded freedom that *Dao* affords. In *Daojiao* (religious Daoism), this unbounded freedom would be understood as immortality.

Meditation. Daoist meditation seeks to break free of all categories of “myriad things” (*wan*

wu) to identify one's body and mind with the unbounded freedom of the primordial *Dao*. Daoist meditational practices aim to deconstruct the body and mind from reified actuality back to the fluidity of the potentiality that has yet to reify itself. Deconstruction of one's body and mind is not the end-goal of Daoist meditation. Rather, deconstruction should lead to the construction of an ideal, embryonic self that embodies a perfected body and mind. For this purpose, meditational techniques are often combined with special breathing techniques that regulate the *qi* to refine and nurture this embryonic self, where new potentialities from the *Dao* are being shaped and brought together. When the embryonic self is ready to burst forth, the present physical body (which is perceived as the husk of the embryo) dies, and the embryo is released to travel to the stars, ride the clouds, go through walls, and so forth.

Many Daoist popular sects have popularized meditational practices that visualize different parts of the human body as interior landscapes, paths and parts of countries. Each point of the human body is mentally visualized as being inhabited by a deity, spirit, immortal or demon, all of whom have their own independent existence. According to Daoist cosmology, death is seen as the release and dispersal of these beings from the human body. Hence, meditational techniques are used to recruit them to serve oneself, to use them to obtain revelations, scriptures, talismans, or even to bribe them or kill them (in the case of the "Three Corpses" or *san shi* – see Daoist Alchemy below).

PHILOSOPHICAL DAOISM (*DAOJIA*)

Philosophical Daoism (*Daojia*) emerged during the period of the Hundred Schools (*Bai jia*) as an advocate of a naturalistic philosophy that emphasized the artificiality of human institutions, and promoted the abandonment of worldly pursuits in favor of an accommodation with the natural flow of things in the world. Although its principal goal is the attainment of *wuwei* ("non-action"), which it shared in common with Legalism, Daoist philosophers interpreted *wuwei* as the mode of being and action that seeks to flow with the grain of the *Dao* (*Tao*, "Way") in bringing manifest forms into actuality from primordial flux. *Wuwei* was understood not as the total lack of activity, but rather *active inactivity* that would allow the *Dao* (*Tao*) to run its course and unveil all potentialities to their fullest without any human interference. Thus, *wuwei* is the opposite of "calculated or intentional action" that limits the fullest range of potentialities. While it is true that some Daoists were attracted to the eremitical lifestyle of permanent contemplation of nature of the type that the Daoist philosopher ZHUANGZI (CHUANG-TZU)* had advocated, many Chinese intellectuals found in philosophical Daoism (*Daojia*) a source of spiritual comfort and renewal in the stressful pressures of Confucian officialdom, especially in the midst of socio-political upheavals.

Principal canonical texts of *Daojia*. The three principal texts of *Daojia* are the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*), attributed by tradition to the mythical LAOZI (LAO-TZU)*; the *Zhuangzi* (*Chuang-Tzu*), written by the Daoist philosopher ZHUANGZI (CHUANG-TZU)* and *Huainanzi* (*Huai-nan Tzu*), a 2nd century B.C. work written by Daoist philosophers at the court of Liu An (circa 179-122 B.C.), the King of Huainan.

***Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*).** Some scholars have questioned the attribution of the great Han

dynasty historian *Sima Qian* (*Ssu-ma Ch'ien*) of the authorship of the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*) to *Laozi*, as there is no mention of an author in all extant versions of the *Daodejing*. *Sima Qian* had recounted a legend in which *Laozi*, weary of living and heading westward in search of wisdom, penned down his philosophy in a work that would be later known as the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*) at request of the “Keeper of the Pass” (i.e., frontier guard). Contemporary textual analysis of the received text points to the existence of several redactional layers. Although the received text is traditionally divided into 81 chapters of 5,000 characters, the earliest extant manuscripts – the *Guodian* text (circa 300 B.C.) and the *Mawangdui* (*Ma-wang Tui*) texts (168 B.C.), while preserving the contents of the work albeit in an inverted order, suggest that the original was probably a continuous work of some 5,400 characters, in all likelihood written or edited by a single author.

The *Daodejing* presents the *Dao* (*Tao*) as a nameless, undefinable, spontaneous, eternal, cyclical and ever-changing cosmological essence. It advocates that one engages in “non-action” (*wu-wei*) to be in harmony with the *Dao*. The utopian society which the *Daodejing* presents is one of harmony between ruler-and-ruled, in which the Sage-Ruler embodies “*wu-wei*” as a way of governing, viz., governing behind the scenes in a manner that the subjects are not even aware that they are being governed. The remarkable similarities of the *Daodejing*'s political philosophy to the Legalists' position, shorn of its autocratic leanings, has led many scholars to speculate a link between the two. Such an interpretation appears to be supported by the *Mawangdui* and *Guodian* manuscripts that invert the traditional order of the received text, beginning with the section on political philosophy rather than the metaphysical section.

Zhuangzi (*Chuang-tzu*). An important *Daojia* text written by *Zhuangzi* (*Chuang-Tzu*, circa 370-286 B.C.). While the text of *Zhuangzi* shares much in common with the *Daodejing* on the cosmological and metaphysical frameworks of *Daojia*, *Zhuangzi* differs from *Daodejing* in one significant area – it champions an anarchistic, spontaneous and subversive approach to life and statecraft that rejects participation in politics in favor of a withdrawal to an eremitical and naturalistic lifestyle of harmony with the *Dao*. *Zhuangzi* highlights the relativity and impermanence of “myriad things” (*wan wu*), and therefore the insignificance of all human action in the world. Rather than wasting time on statecraft and politics, one should focus instead on the harmony of oneself with the *Dao*. Indeed, *Zhuangzi* claimed that he would rather be a living tortoise dragging its tail in the mud, than a gilded but dead tortoise venerated in the ancestral shrine of the King of Chu. This illustration dispels the typical misconception of *Zhuangzi* as an advocate for hedonism and selfishness. *Zhuangzi* was more concerned with the freedom to do what came most naturally within the natural ordering of things in the *Dao*, and a tortoise dragging its tail in the mud best exemplified that natural ordering.

Huainanzi (*Huai-nan Tzu*). This 2nd century B.C. *Daojia* text is important for giving its readers a glimpse into the swirling, intellectual debates during the later years of the Hundred Schools (*Baijia*). It is primarily an apologetical work that seeks to present *Daojia* as superior over the other schools such as Confucianism, Legalism, Moism, etc. It originally comprised 54 chapters – 21 inner chapters on the superior *Daojia* and 33 outer chapters on inferior rival schools, the latter chapters no longer extant today. Its principal significance lies in its advocacy of an alternative philosophical framework for social ordering and statecraft based on *Daojia*.

RELIGIOUS DAOISM (*DAOJIAO*)

Daojiao is a broad category encompassing diverse Daoist popular sects that emerged from the Han Dynasty onwards. In contrast to the focus of *Daojia* (philosophical Daoism) on individualistic introspection and contemplation, the diverse religious sects of *Daojiao* are generally institutional in structure, replete with a hierarchically ordered priesthood, scriptural texts, liturgical ceremonies, purification and exorcism rituals, talismans, divination, as well as pantheons of greater and lesser deities.

Celestial Masters Sect. The oldest and most prominent Daoist popular sect is the Celestial Masters Sect that was founded in 142 A.D. by Zhang Daoling (Chang Tao-ling), who claimed to have received a revelation of the Dao from *Taishang Laojun*, the Highest Venerable Lord who was also the deified LAOZI (LAO-TZU).^{*} The Celestial Masters sect continues to be the largest Daoist popular sect in the 21st century, with a huge following in Taiwan, Hong Kong and in the many Chinese diasporas scattered throughout the world.

Shangqing (Shang Ching) Sect. The second Daoist sect that emerged was the *Shangqing (Shang Ching, “Highest Clarity”)* sect that emerged from a series of apparitions of the immortalized Lady Wei (251-334 A.D.) to the medium *Yang Xi (Yang Hsi)* in the period 364-370 A.D. In these apparitions, Lady Wei was reputed to have dictated the scriptures that would later form the core of the *Shangqing* corpus of canonical texts. The *Shangqing* sect gained many adherents among the Chinese intelligentsia and aristocracy, in contrast to the Celestial Masters sect’s popularity among the masses. *Shangqing* scriptures played a major role in developing the classical artistic and literary conventions, especially in Tang China (618-906 A.D.), when the sect reached the zenith of its influence.

Quest for Immortality. The common thread running through the diverse Daoist popular sects is the quest for immortality within the *Dao*. Within *Daojiao*, immortality means more than a mere indefinite prolongation of one’s mundane life. It is also a yearning for a better life that is commonly described in terms of an achievement of complete and unfettered freedom to move in harmony with the *Dao*. In this regard, classical Daoist metaphors speak of the ability to ride the clouds, breathe under water, go through walls, etc. Immortality also encompasses a transformation of one’s mind to be always attuned to, and completely engaged with, the present. Various Daoist sects emphasized a diverse range of techniques for attaining immortality, understood either literally or metaphorically, or as a prolonging of life. These techniques include: internal and external alchemic practices (see below, under “Daoist Alchemy”), the dietary practice of grain avoidance, gymnastic or sexual exercises, meditation and breathing exercises to regulate the flow of *qi*, and revelations from immortals, i.e., humans who transcended the limitations of human mortality.

Daoist Alchemy. Among the diverse Daoist techniques for attaining immortality, alchemy is perhaps the most significant. Within the many Daoist popular sects, alchemy was practiced in an attempt to transform the Daoist adept into an immortal through the ingestion of the “elixir of immortality” (*dan*). Within *Daojiao* (religious Daoism), two types of alchemic practices may be

distinguished: *wai dan* (“external alchemy”) and *nei dan* (“internal alchemy”). *Wai dan* seeks to concoct elixirs of immortality in specially constructed laboratories for ingestion by the Daoist adept, while *nei dan* seeks to achieve the same through the adept’s *inner* practices of meditation and strict ascetical lifestyle that manipulate what is already present in the adept’s body. Both *wai dan* and *nei dan* presupposes the adept’s faith (i.e., it is going to work), purity (i.e., moral and ritual cleansing) and consecration (i.e., a wholehearted dedication to the quest for immortality).

Wai dan (“external alchemy”) was developed by *fangshi* (*fang-shih*, “prescription masters”), the heirs to the ancient shamans, metallurgists, smelters and magicians. Its theoretical foundations emerged from a combination of the yin-yang cosmological matrix with the “Five Elements” (*wu xing*). Physical immortality of the body was the primary goal of the practitioners of *wai dan*, who had hoped to transmute the highly toxic cinnabar (mercuric sulphide or red ochre) into the elixir of immortality. The use of cinnabar in Daoist alchemy arose of out homological thinking that sought to connect the cinnabar’s red color with blood, and its transformation into liquid mercury “quicksilver” with the vitality of human semen, the source of new life. The outstanding Daoist *wai dan* master, *Ge Hong* (*Ko Hung*, 261-341 A.D.) wrote the 4th century Daoist classical *wai dan* alchemical text called *Baopuzi* (*Pao-p’u tzu*, “Book of the Master who embraces simplicity”), a work which provides recipes on the transmutation of alchemical cinnabar into the elixir of immortality. By the end of the Tang dynasty, *wai dan* had declined and died out, as Daoist adepts began to realize the extreme toxicity of the metals they were experimenting with.

Nei dan (“internal alchemy”) gained popularity towards the end of the Tang Dynasty, when *wai dan* fell into disuse. Attention shifted to applying alchemical theories to the body using homological thinking and using techniques of meditation, breathing, dieting, body and sexual exercises. During this period, the texts of *wai dan* were reinterpreted to refer to the interior of the human body. The raw materials of external alchemy were substituted, using homologous thinking, by the three treasures of semen, vital and spirit energy. The body became the laboratory where the elixir of immortality was produced. The *dan tian* (“fields of cinnabar”) was identified with the three regions of the human body – head, heart and abdomen. These three regions were the center of life, but they were also inhabited by the three corpses (*san shi*) whose principal goal was to hasten death. Popular Daoist thought held that at birth, a person is allotted a limited lifespan, which could be extended or subtracted. The three corpses were three celestial spies who lived in the three “fields of cinnabar” (*dan tian*) in the human body. They leave their human host on the completion of every sixty-day cycle to report to the Jade Emperor on the moral conduct of their human hosts. Based upon their reports, the Jade Emperor would either extend their human hosts’ lives for good deeds, or subtract years for evil deeds. Popular Daoist piety evolved three wayys of dealing with the three corpses: (i) do good deeds, so that the three corpses have nothing but good things to report, (ii) kill the three corpses by the dietary practice of grain avoidance, and (iii) keeping awake on the sixtieth night, so that the three corpses would be unable to escape to make their reports.

See also: BUDDHISM–CHINA; CHINESE PHILOSOPHY; CHINESE RELIGIONS; CONFUCIANISM AND NEO-CONFUCIANISM; LAOZI (LAO-TZU); ZHUANGZI (CHUANG-TZU).

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