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Dàojiào 道教 Daoism / Taoism

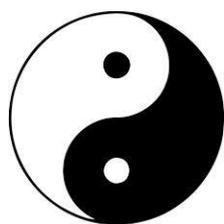
“The doctrine of the way”

The word 道 dào is usually translated as the “way“ or “path“, sometimes also “principle”. The concept itself is beyond description.

The tao that can be told
 is not the eternal Tao
 The name that can be named
 is not the eternal Name.¹

In the Daoist theory “dao” is understood as the origin of the universe and the basis of all existing things. It is the law governing their development and change.² It is also described as the way of the nature, the way of social order and change, the way of self-cultivation and the way of governing a country as well as managing family life.

Each living organism has its own “dao”. For example: an egg is the beginning state of a process that leads to the birth of an organic being as it develops into a larva and further e.g. into a butterfly.



A well-known Daoist symbol is the “ying-yang” emblem that symbolises the duality of all things.

阳 yáng: bright, active masculine.

阴 yīn: dark, quiet, feminine.

Just as there can't be light without darkness, hot does not exist without its counterpart cold. “Yin” and “yang” are not opposites. They always complement each as parts of a whole.

Daoism is the oldest indigenous Chinese spiritual belief system or wisdom tradition that has been institutionalized. It is based on many practices from ancient shamanistic and other folk religious systems. Daoist rituals were traditionally, as they still are, often conducted by so

¹ <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/taote-v3.html> : “*Dao De Jing*”: translation by S. Mitchell.

² Daoist Association of China 2002: Taoism.

called 散居道士 sānjū dàoshi, spiritual specialists living in their own homes and not in monasteries.

Daoism is one of the 5 officially sanctioned religions or belief systems in the People's Republic of China today.

Many, but not all, scholars make a difference between Philosophical Daoism and Religious Daoism.

Philosophical Daoism

Philosophical Daoism emphasizes the way of the nature as the ideal way for a human society as well. The concept of wú wéi 无为 “non-action” or “do nothing and all is done” is essential in Daoist thinking. One could say that it is the only dogma in Philosophical Daoism. The early Daoists sought to be one with the nature understanding humanity and the divine as parts of it. The ultimate aim of a Daoist was to become one with the all-encompassing power, the “dao”.

As the nature functions best, if not manipulated by the human hand so society also functions best, if a ruler does not interfere in its workings. A good ruler should forget about his own desires, lean back and let things take their course. Just as a river finds its way back to the river bed after a flood so does a society find its way back to the state of balance after political turbulences.

When taxes are too high, people go hungry.
When the government is too intrusive,
people lose their spirit.
Act for the people's benefit. Trust them; leave them alone.³

Philosophical Daoists believed in observing the ways of the nature like a child does, learning from them and living according to them. Theoretical thinking and formal learning were actually considered harmful as they diverted a person's attention away from the real world. The general opinion seemed to be that too much thinking leads to greed, which is the root of all evil.

Not-knowing is true knowledge.
Presuming to know is a disease.
First realize that you are sick;
then you can move toward health.⁴

Furthermore, philosophical Daoists basically accepted death as part of life. Striving for longevity and the wish to defeat death were present especially in the southern traditions. However, they became central only with the development of Religious Daoism.

Philosophical Daoism was an individualistic method of trying to live a good life as there were neither institutions nor holy scripts to offer council.

³ <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/taote-v3.html> : “*Dao De Jing*”: translation by S. Mitchell.

⁴ <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/taote-v3.html> : “*Dao De Jing*”: translation by S. Mitchell.

The ideology of both Philosophical Daoism and Religious Daoism are manifested through philosophical reflection on the one hand and metaphysical and magical contents on the other hand.

Religious daoism

Religious Daoism had its beginnings during the 6. - 5. centuries BC when China was going through huge social changes and was in a constant state of war. There was a need for clear instructions on how to regain social order. Various social and political thinkers began to offer their services as counselors to rulers and to write down their insights.

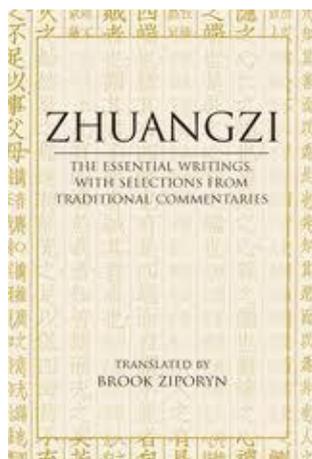
These thinkers put together all they knew about the central ideas of good governance that had been handed down orally or found in written records from earlier times. The result was a large treasure of philosophical and pragmatically oriented text collections.

Put in a written form, certain practices with the aim of influencing things on earth by trying to influence the divine beings in heaven, which were held responsible for everything that happened on earth, became ritualized. This gave rise to a class of ritual specialists, who explained the meanings of the rituals to groups of disciples that began to gather around them. With time a class of spiritual specialists or priests developed. These acted as mediators between the living and the spirit world. In this way Religious Daoism (as well as other belief systems) became institutionalized.

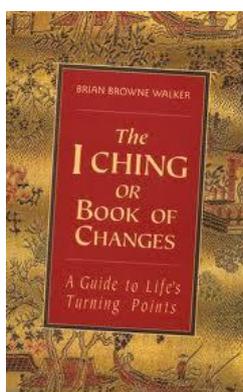
The early philosophical works were compiled by many different authors and only later credited to real or legendary personalities such as 老子 Lǎozǐ and 孔子 Kǒngzǐ (Confucius). However, there is no historical evidence that a person fitting any of the descriptions of an ancient sage known as Laotzi actually existed. Legends make him a contemporary of Confucius (around 600 BC). The Daoist teachings, however, were probably put in written form during the 4. and 3. century BC in books like the 道德经 Dào Dé Jīng, the 庄子 Zhuāngzǐ and the 易经 I Ching or Yi Jīng, the “Book of Changes” (instructions on how to use the book: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMj-wgSrJAY> .)



The Dào Dé Jīng is a collection of aphorisms about all aspects of life based on the age old wisdom that had been handed down orally and found in early written records.



The 庄子 Zhuāngzǐ is named after the philosopher Zhuāngzǐ, a person about whom only little is known. Zhuangzi contains long philosophical essays rather than short aphorisms. This book, like many others, has been written in different styles by more than one author. Zhuangzi stresses relativism in all things: For example, in winter time a warm coat is a blessing, in summer time a nuisance. Also ethical values are relative: what seems good and right today may be totally inappropriate tomorrow.



The I Ching is a book about an ancient divination method. It is a collection of linear signs, so called trigrams, consisting of three either whole or broken linear lines. It includes 64 possible pairs of trigrams, called hexagrams, and a commentary on them. If you want to know, how to use the I Ching just watch this video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMj-wgSrJAY>.

The I Ching is not only part of the Daoist Canon. It is also one of the Confucian Classics.

The four most important schools of Religious Daoism

1. The 天师道 Tiān Shī Dào, “Way of the Celestial Masters“, also called 正一 **Zhèngyī** Daoism was the first really organized group of Daoists believers. It was founded by 张道陵 Zhāng Dào líng in 142 AD in the present day province of Sichuan. According to a family myth Laozi had appeared to Zhang Daoling in order to give him holy scripts, which then became the basis of their belief system. The Celestial Masters did not form an elite group. They welcomed women as well as ethnic minorities.

With time the Celestial Masters developed into a strictly structured eclectic theocracy of “chosen people”. It was structured and governed like a state. In politically rough times the Celestial Masters offered people a safe haven with social support for the weakest.

The Celestial Masters were not a monastic school of Daoism. Their spiritual specialists were mostly married and lived at home.

After political turbulences the state was integrated in the Kingdom of 魏 Wèi in the 3. century AD. The faith community dissolved. Many of the members left Sichuan and spread all over China. Quite a few of them went to the south. Other refugees from northern China, also heading for the south, were devotees of the cult as well and kept practicing it. The school still exists in small groups today.

An important aspect of the Celestial Masters was the new understanding of the causes of illness. Illness was considered to be a punishment for wrongful behavior causing the life energy 气 qì to leave the body. Priests talked with patients and encouraged them to find the source of their punishment through meditation⁵ (an import from Buddhism). They gave the patients herbs, drugs and all kinds of mixtures⁶ and conducted psychologically important rituals. All this happened following the age old traditions of Philosophical Daoism of taking responsibility for one's actions, but now the believers were not any longer alone. They were assisted by spiritual specialists.

2. The 茅山 Máoshān also called the 上清 Shàngqīng, the “Utmost Purity” school of Daoism developed in southern China. It was a combination of local cults, Celestial Masters and was also somewhat influenced by Buddhist ideas. Maoshan was practiced by emigrants from northern China as well as Chinese and non-Chinese natives of the south.

楊羲 Yáng Xī, a well-known medium, is reported to have received messages from immortals and other spirits that appeared to him. He wrote the messages down and these texts formed the basis of the belief system of Maoshan School of Daoism.

The Maoshan introduced new deities and new holy mountains, where spirits and gods dwelled. Ancestor spirits played a very important role as they were believed to actively interfere in the daily life of the living on earth.

In pursue of immortality the Maoshan made use of alchemy and drugs. They contributed much to the development of the science of chemistry. Intensive meditation and visualizations formed an important part of the individual practice.

Maoshan introduced and practiced the originally Buddhist concept of transference of merit meaning that the merit one has gained for good deeds can be transferred to others merely by wishing it to happen.

3. The 灵宝 Língbǎo, “School of Numinous Treasure” founded by 葛巢甫 Gě Cháofǔ in the early 5. century AD, was influenced by the Celestial Masters and the Maoshan school as well as Confucianism and Buddhism.

⁵ 內丹術 nèidān shu “internal alchemy” includes all kinds of meditation techniques.

⁶ 外丹術 wàidān shu or “external alchemy” includes herbs, drugs and alchemic mixtures including e.g. gold and cinnabar. Oftentimes the treatments ended fatally.

In this school common rituals were generally considered more important than individual meditation. Those who sought to gain enlightenment individually lived in monasteries, where they practiced intensive meditation.

The Lingbao School introduced the concepts of hell and rebirth based on Buddhist texts. These were translated and reinterpreted to fit the Chinese context.

Many present day Daoist rituals are based on Lingbao rituals

4. The 全真 Quánzhēn⁷, “Complete Truth” was founded by 王嘉 Wáng Zhé in the 12th century AD. Today Quanzhen is the main official branch of Daoism in the People’s Republic of China. The Quanzhen beliefs and practices do not radically differ from those of other Daoist schools.

The Quanzhen has always enjoyed official protection, because its preferably celibate and communal mode of life (based on Buddhist ideology) has been fairly easy to control. In this position Quanzhen has played an important role in transmitting Daoist texts and practices, especially through the persecutions of the twentieth century.

Most believers simply take part in the rituals, the cult to the immortals, and perhaps meditation classes, others choose to join the order and take up celibate life. After a given time they, both men and women, can be ordained.

The Daoist pantheon

The Daoist heaven is inhabited by ancestors, immortals and various kinds of deities. By the 3. century BC there were already many quite differentiated images of immortals.



⁷ Vincent Goossaert, "Quanzhen." In Fabrizio Pregadio, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, London: Routledge 2008; <http://www.daowest-cultivation.com/daoism/daoist-sects/quanzhen-dao-complete-reality-daoism.html>

Immortals are thought to be human beings who have become immortal through self-cultivation. Their place is between human beings and deities and their task is to act as mediators between the earth and the heaven. The so called Eight Immortals serve as models for achieving immortality through leading a morally faultless life.

In some old texts Laotzi is presented as an immortal. In later texts he is often regarded as a Messiah figure, who in troubled times appears on earth to help the living. Many schools worship Laotzi as a god.

There is a strict hierarchical order of deities in the Daoist pantheon. Each of them has his or her specific responsibilities. For example: the God of the Town is supposed to guard towns and cities and the God of the Land is a guardian of villages.

The highest ranking deities, beside Laozi himself, are (from the left) the Supreme Way Heavenly Worthy, the Primordial Heavenly Worthy and the Spiritual Treasure Heavenly Worthy.



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These three are regarded as emanations of “dao”, omnipotent and supreme.⁹

⁸ <http://www.taoistsecret.com/taoistgod.html>.

⁹ Daoist Association of China 2002: Taoism.

One of the oldest known deities of China is 西王母 Xīwángmǔ, the Queen Mother of the Western Mountains. The first mentions of the Queen Mother date back to oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty (1766-1122 BC). She is believed to live in the Kunlun Mountains in the far west at the margin of heaven and earth. Her magic peach tree is a cosmic axis that connects heaven and earth.¹⁰



An 18th-century woodcut depicts the goddess in her old shamanic form, with tiger's teeth and bamboo staff, sitting on a mountaintop with various chimeric animals.¹¹

Daoism today

Typical for the Daoist thinking is the idea of permanent change. This is the reason why in earlier times there never existed a strong central institution that would have acted as an ultimate authority for all.

It is very difficult to find any reliable statistics about Daoism in China today. The “White Paper - Freedom of Religious Belief in China 1997” gives the following figures: China now has over 1,500 Taoist temples and more than 25,000 Taoist priests and nuns.

¹⁰ <http://www.suppressedhistories.net/goddess/xiwangmu.html>.

¹¹ <http://www.suppressedhistories.net/goddess/xiwangmu.html>.

As for practicing believers it is simply impossible to give any reliable figures for the very simple reason that most Chinese people do not adhere to only one spiritual belief system, but often practice different ones at the same time.

Today the 北京白云观 Běijīng Báiyún Guàn or “The White Cloud Tempel” in Beijing houses the offices of the Daoist Association of China. It represents the Quanzhen School, which is the main official branch of Daoism in the PRC today. It is also the home of the Chinese Daoist Academy, the first national institution that acts as the highest authority in Daoist learning.

Lai Chi-Tim provides the following information: By 1999, 133 regional Daoist Associations had been established at a nation-wide level. They are responsible for the management of temples, training of monks, priests and nuns as well as negotiating with the government. Furthermore he tells about the ordination held at the Baiyun Guan in 1989, the first one since 1949. At the ceremony 75 ordinands, 30 of whom were women, were ordained. A further ordination ceremony for some 400 monks and nuns took place in 1995.¹²

The temple has been carefully restored. It is a peaceful oasis in the buzzing city. Tourists go there to marvel about the beautiful buildings and the exotic looking monks who go about their daily business of sweeping the ground and talking to visitors. Local people go there to worship and to discuss their health problems with the monks.



I was visiting the White Cloud Temple with a local friend when we saw two women burning joss sticks and bowing their heads in front of statues representing the pantheon of Daoist

¹² Lai Chi-Tim (2003). Daoism in China Today, 1980–2002. *The China Quarterly*, 174, pp 413-427
doi:10.1017/S0009443903000251.

Gods. My friends asked them what they were praying for. The younger woman told us that she was about to take an entrance exam to a university. Together with her mother she had been going thru all the spiritual institutions of Beijing to ask for support. Just to make sure.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17Q4mkyaWXk> presents a video film about the temple.

The Daoist Tempel in Dong Bei Yang and the 泰山 Tàì Shān mountain

Dong Bei Yang is the home village of my dear friend Zhao Xiao Yan. It is situated about 400 km southwest of Beijing in the Hebei Provinz. Xiao Yan took me home for an autumn temple fair a few years ago. In addition to being a religious affair, the temple fair also functions as market.

It was a great time to “go home” as everyone else was there as well. As my friend and I took a stroll in the village we were greeted every few minutes by a relative or a friend. So in addition to visiting the temple, we had tea and watermelon seeds in many houses along the way and heard the latest news.

The temple in the village has a long, rich history. It was used as a school during the Cultural Revolution., but today it is again an important spiritual center of the Tai Shan School of Daoism. They worship the third daughter of the legendary Jade Emperor¹³ as a High Goddess.

The priests welcomed Xiao Yan as a daughter of the village and me as her good friend. They patiently answered my many questions about the history of the Temple and its social significance. Very obviously the Temple is an important place for people to consult with the priests about their daily concerns. It is also a spiritual refuge for quiet meditation.

I was taken into the holiest of the holy to see ancient paintings of the highest Gods. This was an honor indeed, as my friend said: “Only priests can go in there !”.

A couple of years later I went up to Tai Shan, one of the five holy Daoist Mountains, together with Xiao Yan. A bus took us to the starting point of the stone stairway to the mountain top. It has about 7000 stone steps altogether.



¹³ See: <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/cosmos/prb/heavenly.htm>

We got into a modern gondola and hiked up only the last part, of the way, which was heavy enough work in the hot, foggy weather.



The area around the mountain top has grown into a small village with souvenir shops and restaurants. Numerous little shrines and kiosks are scattered along the stairway.

A trip up to Tai Shan can probably not be compared with a trip to Mecca. However, it seems to have a certain spiritual meaning for at least some of the visitors. They probably gain quite a lot of merit points by doing the hard climb up and down the “stairway to heaven”.

Tai Shan was taken to the list of UNESCO World Cultural Heritage in 1987. Perhaps you’d like to watch this video: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/437/video> .

My sources:

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Sources for further reading:

Isabelle Robinet and Livia Kahn's books on the subject

"Spiritual Traditions of China" Internet Resources Site, compiled by Prof. Ron Epstein

<http://online.sfsu.edu/rone/China/spiritualchina.html>