

BASIC INFORMATION SHEET ON DAOISM (TAOISM)

Louis Komjathy 康思奇, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Chinese Religions and Comparative Religious Studies
Department of Theology and Religious Studies
University of San Diego

This is an essentialized and simplified information sheet on Daoism (Taoism). It is particularly intended for non-specialist educators who teach Daoism or who are interested in deepening their understanding.

PRELIMINARY POINTS

Daoism (spelled Taoism in the older Wade-Giles romanization system) is an indigenous Chinese religious tradition in which reverence for the Dao, translatable as “the Way” and “a way,” is a matter of ultimate concern. Daoism was a *religious* community from the beginning, here dated to the Warring States period (480-222 BCE). As a Western category, “Daoism” may be understood as shorthand for Daoist adherents, communities and their religious expressions. With over two thousand years of history, Daoism is a diverse and complex religious tradition; it includes varied forms of religiosity that may be perplexing to those who construct “religion” in terms of founders, authoritative scriptures and “orthodox beliefs.” Throughout Chinese history Daoists have consistently focused on the Dao 道 as sacred and ultimate concern. This is expressed in indigenous Chinese designations, including *daojia* 道家 (Family of the Dao), *daojiao* 道教 (Teachings of the Dao), *daoshi* 道士 (adept of the Dao), and *xuanfeng* 玄風 (Mysterious Movement). That is, Daoists have understood themselves as those who “transmit the Dao” (*chuandao* 傳道); they have seen themselves as part of the “tradition of the Dao” (*daotong* 道統). In the modern world, Daoism also has become a global religious tradition characterized by cultural diversity and multiethnicity. At the same time, like Zen Buddhism before it, Daoism is the object of various Western fantasies and fictions.

ON “DAOISM” AND “TAOISM” (ROMANIZATION)

Both “Daoism” and “Taoism” refer to the same Chinese religion; they are both pronounced with a “d” sound. “Taoism” derives from Wade-Giles romanization, an earlier way of approximating the sound of Chinese characters into alphabetic script. “Daoism” derives from the more recent Pinyin romanization system, which is the official system created by the People’s Republic of China and utilized throughout mainland China. Wade-Giles uses “Tao,” “Taoist,” and “Taoism.” If these terms were pronounced with a “t” sound, they would appear as “T’ao,” “T’aoist,” and “T’aoism.” That is, in Wade-Giles, a “t” without an apostrophe (’) is a “d” sound. Pinyin uses “Dao,” “Daoist,” and “Daoism.” The latter is the preferred form. The matter is complicated because some scholars now use Pinyin romanization, but continue to employ the Wade-Giles derived “Tao,” “Taoist,” “Taoism.” The rationales for this are varied, but none of them hold up to critical scrutiny.

Scholarly opinion differs on the origins and early history of Daoism. Nonetheless, there is consensus that the category of “philosophical Daoism” is inaccurate and outdated. It should be completely abandoned. Unfortunately, specialist research has yet to influence non-specialist discourse, both academic and popular. Every major “world religions” textbook utilizes the misleading distinction between so-called ~~philosophical Daoism~~ and so-called ~~religious Daoism~~. The use of these categories should be taken, *ipso facto*, as a sign of ignorance and inaccuracy. The easiest solution to this problem is to replace “philosophical Daoism” with “classical Daoism,” and to emphasize the religious dimensions of classical Daoism, of the “early inner cultivation lineages” (Harold Roth, Brown University). These dimensions

include an identifiable religious community that employed apophatic meditation with the aim of mystical union with the Dao.

PRIMARY CHARACTERISTICS AND ESSENTIAL POINTS

Considered **as a historical cultural tradition** and in terms of geographical origins, Daoism is an indigenous Chinese religion. Daoism is Chinese because it originates in Chinese culture and, in some sense, because it is most clearly understood through the Chinese language and views of being. Daoism is a “religion” because it involves an orientation towards and relationship with the sacred. Daoism is a “tradition” because it is a community of dedicated practitioners connected to each other as a historical and energetic continuum.

The Dao 道 is the sacred or ultimate concern of Daoists. From a Daoist perspective, there are four primary characteristics of the Dao: (1) Source; (2) Unnamable mystery; (3) All-pervading sacred presence (qi); (4) Universe as cosmological process (Nature). The Dao is impersonal and ineffable. Through a spontaneous, impersonal process, the Dao moved from primordial undifferentiation to differentiation (the manifest world). Daoist “theology” thus emphasizes emanation and immanence. It is thus primarily monistic, panentheistic, panenhenic, and secondarily animistic and polytheistic. Daoists view gods and immortals as manifestations of the Dao. There is no necessary distinction between the Dao as unnamable mystery and its various phenomenal expressions.

Daoism does not have a founder or principal scripture. Different adherents, communities and movements revere different individuals and scriptures. Generally speaking, **Laozi** 老子 (Master Lao) receives a place of veneration, but Laozi is pseudo-historical and mythological. He is a composite figure. In terms of influential scriptures, the **Daode jing** 道德經 (Tao-te-ching; Scripture on the Dao and Virtue), also known as the **Laozi** 老子 (Lao-tzu; Book of Venerable Masters), has perhaps been most central and influential. Although attributed to Laozi, the text is, in fact, an anthology with material from a variety of historical periods and early Daoist communities. It is a multivocal anthology. We know this because of actual archaeology discoveries and because of textual archaeology. The received *Daode jing*, the eighty-one chapter version, was redacted by Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249).

The primary textual collection in the Daoist tradition is called **the Daozang** 道藏 (Daoist Canon). The current edition was compiled in the fifteenth century CE and consists of roughly 1,500 texts. The texts come from every major period and movement of Daoist history.

For simplicity’s sake, we may divide the history of Daoism into **four primary periods**: (1) Classical Daoism; (2) Early organized Daoism; (3) Later organized Daoism; and (4) Modern Daoism.

- Classical Daoism refers to the early inner cultivation lineages, master-disciple communities, of the fourth through second centuries BCE. It is associated with the *Daode jing*, *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang), and other, less well-known works. Emphasis is placed on apophatic meditation (stillness and emptiness) aimed at mystical union with the Dao.
- Early organized Daoism is the beginning of Daoism as an organized religion. It begins in the second century CE and extends to roughly the seventh century. The principal movement is called Tianshi 天師 (Celestial Masters), which was founded by Zhang Daoling 張道陵 (34?-156? CE). Also called Zhengyi 正一 (Orthodox Unity), this is a house-holder tradition. It tends to be a village-based community with married, ordained priests who conduct rituals for community benefit. The second century also corresponded to the introduction of Buddhism to China from Central Asia. Other key movements in early organized Daoism include Taiqing 太清 (Great Clarity), Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity), and Lingbao 靈寶 (Numinous Treasure). Early

organized Daoism is distinguished by the emergence of a highly organized community and new models for Daoist practice and attainment, specifically ethical, ritualistic, alchemical, and ascetic.

- Later organized Daoism begins around the seventh century and extends to the early twentieth century. The principal movement is Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection), which was founded by Wang Zhe 王嘉 (1113-1170). It is a monastic tradition that emphasizes celibacy, vegetarianism, and abstention from intoxicants. Other key movements include various internal alchemy (*neidan*) lineages as well as new deity and ritual traditions. Later organized Daoism is distinguished by the emergence of a fully integrated monastic system, complete with ordination ranks, and of semi-centralized religious institutions. It is also pivotal in Daoist history for the ascendance of internal alchemy as the dominant form of Daoist meditation and for the introduction and incorporation of new forms of Daoist ritual.

- Modern Daoism refers to Daoism following the end of Chinese dynastic rule in 1912. It may be further divided into “early modern Daoism” (1912-1978) and “late modern Daoism” (1978-present), including contemporary developments. Technically speaking, modern Daoism is part of “later organized Daoism.” One of the key developments here is the globalization of Daoism, specifically the emergence of a transnational, international movement characterized by cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Major divisions of contemporary Daoism.

- Tianshi 天師 (T’ien-shih; Celestial Masters). A.k.a. Zhengyi 正一 (Cheng-i; Orthodox Unity). Begins in 2nd c. CE with a revelation from Laojun 老君 (Lord Lao) to Zhang Daoling 張道陵 (34?-156? CE). Originally CM was patrilineal position (Zhang family). Householder (married priests), community/village-based (rural), and ritualistic. Often wear Western dress and short hair.

- Quanzhen 全真 (Ch’üan-chen; Complete Perfection). A.k.a. Complete Reality. Begins in 12th c. with Wang Zhe’s 王嘉 (Chongyang 重陽 [Redoubled Yang]; 1113-1170) mystical experiences with immortals. Local then regional ascetic/eremitic movement; then monastic order (13th c.-present). Revitalized in 17th as the Longmen 龍門 (Dragon Gate) lineage under Wang Changyue 王常月 (Kunyang 崑陽 [Paradisiacal Yang]; 1622-1680). Primarily monastic (celibate, vegetarian, no intoxicants), monasteries, and meditative and ritualistic. Its headquarters is at Baiyun guan 白雲觀 (White Cloud Monastery; Beijing).

- Also other monastic and family lineages

Key Figures

- Like Hinduism, NO FOUNDER → Movements and lineages with principal teachers

- Early master-disciples, with Laozi and Zhuangzi as most famous

- **Laozi** 老子 (Master Lao; fl. 560 BCE?). “Old Master.” Li Er 李聃 & Lao Dan 老聃. Pseudo-historical. Attributed author of *Daode jing*.

- **Zhuangzi** 莊子 (Master Zhuang; ca. 370-ca. 290 BCE). Zhuang Zhou. Teachings contained in Inner Chapters (chs. 1-7) of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang).

- **Zhang Daoling** 張道陵 (fl. 142 CE). Founder of Celestial Master movement and 1st Celestial Master.

- **Lü Dongbin** 呂洞賓 (b. 798?). Most famous immortal in Daoist history.

- **Wang Zhe** 王嘉 (1113-1170). Founder of Quanzhen movement and 1st Patriarch (cf. Chan/Zen).

 - Also **Seven Perfected** (Ma, Qiu, Sun), Wang Zhe’s seven senior disciples.

- Founders of other movements and famous lineage members

- Also immortals, divine beings, and gods

• **Major Texts** (Narrative dimension; also oral)

- Complex historically. Various historical layers, even in same book.
- Difference texts emphasized in different Daoist movements and lineages, although the *Daode jing* is probably the most influential text in the Daoist tradition. Also lineage-specific (diversity).
- **Daozang 道藏 (Daoist Canon). Open canon**; constantly changing with new additions. 1st compiled around 5th c. CE. Received version compiled in 15th c., with 17th c. supplement. Roughly 1,500 texts, with varying levels of relevance.
- Many **genres** of texts.
- *Daode jing* and *Zhuangzi* most influential/foundational.
- **Daode jing 道德經** (Tao-te-ching; Scripture on the Dao and Virtue). A.k.a. *Laozi 老子* (Book of Venerable Masters; conventionally=Book of Master Lao). Attributed to Laozi (pseudo-historical). **Anthology. Received edition** 81 chapters (poetic stanzas). Many historical and textual layers. **Multivocal** and **polysemic** (multiple significations) anthology.
- *Zhuangzi 莊子* (Book of Master Zhuang). Also known as the *Nanhua zhenjing 南華真經* (Perfect Scripture of Perfected Nanhua), with Nanhua 南華 (Southern Florescence) being an honorific name for Zhuangzi. **Multi-vocal anthology. Received edition** 33 chapters (prose). Parables and stories. Many historical and textual layers. **Inner Chapters** associated with teachings of ZZ.
- **Daoist readings and views**. Also commentaries.
- **NOT *Yijing*** (Classic of Change).
- **Also not *Tao of Poo*** (Benjamin Hoff), *Wisdom of Tao* (Wayne Dyer), or *Tao Te Ching* by Stephen Mitchell. Like the use of “philosophical Daoism” or reference to Tao should be taken as sign of inaccuracy and misunderstanding.

Distinctive Beliefs (Worldview/Symbol System)

- **Theology**. Dao. Primarily monistic and panentheistic. But Dao immanent in everything→ Panenhenic, polytheistic, and animistic. Many gods. Most important are Laojun 老君 (Lord Lao) and Sanqing 三清 (Three Purities).
- **Cosmogony/cosmology**. Emanation. From primordial undifferentiation to differentiation. Spontaneous, impersonal (no agency or intentionality; not “God” or “creation”). Yin-yang. Not Daoist (“traditional Chinese cosmology”→ pan-Chinese, even pan-East Asian)
- **Soteriology**. Diverse/multiple. (1) Alignment/union with the Dao→ Living through the Dao; (2) Immortality.
- **View of Self**: (1) Composite (two-“soul” model) (spiritualist=transitory spirit [not eternal soul])→ Dissolution after death or created immortality (transcendent spirit). (2) Later, Buddhist-influenced=consciousness-based and reincarnation (quasi-docetic).
- **Anthropology**. High. Overly optimistic and world-affirming. Humans are manifestations of the Dao. Innate nature.
- **Key values/concerns**. Non-action (*wuwei 無為*; also practice), non-knowing, non-contention, flexibility, yielding, namelessness (invisibility/unknowability), desirelessness, clarity and stillness, simplicity, contentment.
- **Lineage, ordination, community**
 - Degrees of commitment and adherence (precepts)
 - Degrees of affiliation and participation (self-cultivation)
- **Sense of place and rootedness**

Key Practices

- Diverse—tends to be lineage- and community-specific.
- A **comprehensive Daoist training regimen** includes dietetics, ethics, health and longevity practice, meditation, ritual, seasonal awareness, and scripture study.

- For members of **Orthodox Unity**, ritual is most important. Usually communal and public. Sometimes large-scale performances. Zhai-purification and Jiao-renewal rites.
- For members of **Complete Perfection**, meditation and ritual are primary. Also celibacy, vegetarianism, and no intoxicants (monastic).
 - Meditation. Diverse. (1) Quiet sitting (apophatic/emptiness-based meditation); (2) Internal alchemy.
 - Ritual. Bowing. Scripture recitation. Chanting liturgy. Occasionally large public rituals (*zhai & jiao*). Also *chanhui* (atonement).
- Unlike Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, neither Confucianism nor Daoism have missionary tendencies. Like Orthodox Judaism and Orthodox Christianity, Daoists tend to be unconcerned with or even discourage conversion. **Ethnic religion**, but now **affinity** (*yuanfen* 緣分).
- **NOT** Chinese medicine, Fengshui (Chinese geomancy), Qigong (Ch'i-kung), sexual yoga, Taiji quan (T'ai-chi ch'uan), etc. **Some connection and use.**

Sacred Sites (also Pilgrimage Sites) and Architecture

- Ancestral Halls: (1) Louguan 樓觀/Lookout Tower Monastery (Zhouzhi, Shaanxi); (2) Chongyang gong 重陽宮 /Palace of Chongyang (Huxian, Shaanxi); (3) Longmen dong 龍門洞/ Dragon Gate Cavern (near Longxian, Shaanxi)
- Longhu shan 龍虎山/Dragon-Tiger Mountain (near Yingtian, Jiangxi). Contains Tianshi fu 天師府 (Mansion of the Celestial Master). Becomes prominent after Tang dynasty.
- Baiyun guan 白雲觀/White Cloud Monastery (Beijing). Chinese Daoist Association.
- Lineage specific; also many sacred mountains and grotto-heavens

Symbols

- Usually Yin-yang/Taiji Diagram, but technically inaccurate
- Dao character
- Dipper
- Lotus (Buddhist)

Distinctive Dress and Gestures

- Monk and priest robes. Traditionally, dark blue robes with diagonal cut
- Also long hair and beards, topknots, hairpins and hats

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND PITFALLS TO AVOID

Unfortunately, most of these are present in World Religions textbooks.

- Making a distinction between so-called “philosophical Daoism” and so-called “religious Daoism.” Daoism was a religion from the beginning.
- Essentializing classical Daoism as “original Daoism.” There’s no such thing.
- Identifying Laozi as the founder of Daoism. Laozi is mythological and pseudo-historical
- Identifying the *Daode jing* as authored by Laozi. The *Daode jing* is a multi-vocal anthology that consists of various historical and textual layers.
- Identifying any of the following as Daoist: Chinese medicine, Fengshui, Qigong (Ch'i-kung), sexual yoga, Taiji quan (Tai-chi ch'uan), the *Yijing* (I-ching), yin-yang, and so forth
- Using inaccurate translations of the *Daode jing* (e.g., Stephen Mitchell, Ursula LeGuin). Accurate translations include those of Stephen Addiss (literary/poetic), Michael LaFargue (historical/praxis-based), D.C. Lau (philological/historical), John Wu (philological), Wu Yi (philological), and so forth.

- Treating popular appropriations as though they are part of the Daoist tradition (e.g., Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh*, Wayne Dyer's *Change Your Thoughts* or *Living the Wisdom of the Tao*, etc.). As I say to my students, "Daoists are not idiotic bears," "pop psychologists," or "self-help gurus"
- Presenting organized Daoism as superstition or as a later, degenerate expression of classical Daoism

RELIABLE SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Books and Articles

- Bokenkamp, Stephen. 2005. "Daoism: An Overview." In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones, volume 14, 2176-2192. New York and London: MacMillan.
- Kirkland, Russell. 1997. "The Historical Contours of Taoism in China: Thoughts on Issues of Classification and Terminology." *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25: 57-82.
- _____. 1998. "Teaching Taoism in the 1990s." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 1.2: 121-29.
- _____. 2002. "The History of Taoism: A New Outline." *Journal of Chinese Religions* 30: 177-93.
- _____. 2004. *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kohn, Livia, ed. 2000. *Daoism Handbook*. Leiden: Brill.
- _____. 2001. *Daoism and Chinese Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Three Pines Press.
- Komjathy, Louis. 2008. *Handbooks for Daoist Practice*. Hong Kong: Yuen Yuen Institute.
- _____. In progress. *Daoism: Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum.
- Miller, James. 2003. *Daoism: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Miller, James, and Elijah Siegler. 2007. "Of Alchemy and Authenticity: Teaching about Daoism Today." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 10.2: 101-8.

Websites

- Center for Daoist Studies: www.daoistcenter.org
 Daoist Studies: www.daoiststudies.org