

## Popular Western Taoism (PWT)

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At the farthest reaches of popular Western appropriations and exploitations of Daoism are adherents who are best understood as members of a new religious movement (NRM), or, following their own self-representations, an ancient but new and perennially relevant form of “spirituality.” That NRM may be labeled “Popular Western Taoism” (PWT), with “Taoism” pronounced with a hard “t” sound. In the case of the United States, PWT adherents and groups are the most publicly visible self-identified “Daoists.” They are most likely to construct Daoism as “ancient philosophy” and (trans-religious) “spirituality,” wherein the Dao (Tao) is identified as an abstract first principle or “energy field,” and wherein Dao-ists just “go with the flow” (read: follow their own desires and egoistic motivations). Such accounts of “Daoism” are characterized by ahistorical, acultural and anti-religious views. Here the *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power) is read, most often in inaccurate popular translations (e.g., by Ursula LeGuin, Stephen Mitchell, Wayne Dyer), as the “Daoist Bible,” as source of “universal wisdom,” and as a guidebook for alternative spirituality. When people read such “translations” (actually “versions” and “adaptations”), they are not reading a Daoist scripture (sacred text written in classical Chinese), but rather a contemporary American cultural production.

While its roots extend back to the first moments of the “Western encounter with the Orient,” including received legacies of colonialism, missionization, and Orientalism, PWT as an emerging form of alternative hybrid spirituality first emerged in the mid to late 1970s. Major early players in the formation of Popular Western Taoism included James Legge (1815-1987), John Blofeld (1913-1987), Alan Watts (1915-1973), Gia-fu Feng (1919-1985; Stillpoint Foundation), Al Chung-liang Huang (b. ca. 1930; Living Tao Foundation), Stephen Chang (b. ca. 1940; Foundation of Tao), Bruce Lee (1940-1973), and Kwai Chang Caine (David Carradine; 1972-1975). While PWT appropriates certain elements from Daoism (e.g., the Dao [Way] and *Dàodé jīng*), its primary informing worldview derives from modern cultural influences. In the case of the United States, these include Protestant Christianity, American Transcendentalism, 1960s counter-culture, the human potential movement, New Age spirituality, Perennial Philosophy, alternative healthcare, health and fitness movements, self-help and popular psychology, and so forth. Contemporary PWT adherents are most likely to conflate Daoism with other Chinese cultural traditions, including Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Fengshui, Chinese martial arts (e.g., *Tàijí quán* [“Tai Chi”]), and *Qìgōng* (Ch’ì-kūng), which have only tenuous connections with the Daoist religious tradition. Almost everything found on the internet is one form or another of PWT. It, along its representatives’ ubiquitous influence on the popular understanding of “Daoism,” has now become institutionalized in such groups, physically existing and virtual, as Esalen Taoism, Reform Taoist Congregation, Tao Bums, Wandering Daoists, and various other so-called “Tao Groups.” The PWT construction of “Daoism” is found in the whole gamut of “new age capitalism” and “alternative spirituality,” from Fengshui consultations and *Yijīng* divination to “Yin Yoga” and the “Tao of” genre of literature. There are also various popular appropriations of the *Dàodé jīng*, specifically through the “*Tao Te Ching* Translation Industry” (TTCTI), by such individuals as Wayne Dyer, Benjamin Hoff, Ursula LeGuin, and Stephen Mitchell, among others.

There are major differences between the historical contours and defining characteristics of the religious tradition *which is Daoism* and the construction of “Daoism” within Popular Western Taoism. In addition to the obvious connection with Chinese culture, members of the Daoist religious tradition have placed and continue to place a strong emphasis on revelation, lineage, community, embodiment, material culture, and place. Throughout Chinese history, Daoists have tended to believe that “tradition” was larger than “self.” In addition, although the primary form of Daoist “theology” (discourse on the sacred) is monistic, Daoists have recognized the immanent presence of the Dao in all things, including in immortals and gods. Traditionally speaking, Daoists are polytheists. In contrast, PWT, following the cultural traditions mentioned above, tends to reject all of these defining characteristics of Daoism. The matter is complicated by the frequent emphasis on “essences” and use of a “rhetoric of tradition,” even including (fabricated) “lineage,” among PWT adherents.

