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Common Misconceptions about Daoism

Louis Komjathy 康思奇, Ph.D.
Center for Daoist Studies 道學中心

Popular misconceptions about Daoism are numerous and increasingly influential in the modern world. All of these perspectives fail to understand the *religious tradition which is Daoism*, a religious tradition that is complex, multifaceted, and rooted in traditional Chinese culture. These misconceptions have their origins in traditional Confucian prejudices, European colonialism, and Christian missionary sensibilities, especially as expressed by late nineteenth-century Protestants. Most of these views are located in American designer hybrid ("New Age") spirituality, Orientalism, Perennial Philosophy, and spiritual capitalism. They domesticate, sterilize and misrepresent Daoism, and disempower actual Daoists and Daoist communities. In their most developed expressions, they may best be understood as part of a new religious movement (NRM) called "Popular Western Taoism" (PWT), with Taoism pronounced with a hard "t" sound. The current state of Daoism in America may thus be compared to that of Zen Buddhism in the 1950s and 1960s (cf. *Dharma Bums* and Alan Watts with the Mountains and Rivers Order), although some have suggested that it more closely resembles the Euro-American understanding of Buddhism in the 1890s. In terms of the Western encounter with Daoism, this was the time of the World's Parliament of Religions (1893) and James Legge's (1815-1897) contributions to the *Sacred Books of the East* (Max Muller, ed.), especially *The Texts of Taoism* (1891).

Popular Misconception	**Informed View**
Dao (Tao) is a trans-religious and universal name for the sacred, and there are "Dao-ists" ("Tao-ists") who transcend the limitations of the Daoist religious tradition.	道, Romanized as *dào* or *tào*, is a Chinese character utilized by Daoists to identify that which they believe is sacred and ultimately real (Reality). There are specific, foundational Daoist views concerning the Dao, which originate in the earliest Daoist communities of the Warring States period (480-222 BCE).
Daoism consists of two forms, "philosophical Daoism" and "religious Daoism."[*]	The distinction between so-called ~~philosophical Daoism~~ and ~~religious Daoism~~ is a modern Western fiction, which–reflects colonialist and missionary agendas and sensibilities. The use of such categories, even in scare quotation marks, should be taken, *ipso facto*, as indicative of ignorance and misunderstanding concerning Daoism. From its beginnings in the Warring States period (480-222 BCE), "Daoism" consisted

[*] These characterizations require reflection on the categories of "philosophy" and "religion," including the ways in which Daoists have constructed and understood their own tradition.

	of religious practitioners and communities. Considered as a whole, Daoism is a complex and diverse religious tradition. It consists of various adherents, communities and movements, which cannot be reduced to a simplistic bifurcation. Its complexity may be mapped in terms of historical periodization as well as models of practice and attainment.
"Philosophical Daoism" is the original form of Daoism and is best understood as "philosophy" (disembodied thinking/way of thought).	Outside of the modern world, there is no form of Daoism that is not "religious." Although there are aspects of Daoism that are "philosophical," the category ~~philosophical Daoism~~ fails to consider the centrality of embodied practice (way of being), community, and place in Daoism, especially in "classical Daoism." It is based on a systematic mischaracterization of the inner cultivation lineages of Warring States Daoism and a misreading of the earliest Daoist texts, namely, the *Lǎozi* (*Lǎo-tzu*; a.k.a. *Dàodé jīng*) and *Zhuāngzi* (*Chuāng-tzu*), among others.
Dàojiā 道家 and *dàojiào* 道教 correspond to the Western categories of "philosophical Daoism" and "religious Daoism," respectively.	*Dàojiā* 道家, literally "Family of the Dao," and *dàojiào* 道教, literally "Teachings of the Dao," are indigenous Chinese categories with no correspondence to the Western constructs of ~~philosophical Daoism~~ and ~~religious Daoism~~. Each term has a complex history, with its meaning changing in different contexts. For example, in the fifth century, *dàojiā* referred to the Daoist religious community in general and the Daoist priesthood in particular.
Lǎozi 老子 (Lǎo-tzu; Master Lǎo/Old Master/Old Child) is the founder of Daoism.	Lǎozi, a.k.a. Lǎo Dān 老聃 and Lǐ Ér 李耳, is a pseudo-historical figure. His received "biography," as contained in Sīmǎ Tán's 司馬談 (ca. 165-110 BCE) and Sīmǎ Qiān's 司馬遷 (ca. 145-86 BCE) *Shǐjì* 史記 (Records of the Historian; dat. ca. 94 BCE), combines information about a variety of people from various sources. If Lǎozi existed, we do not know anything about him. There is, in turn, no "founder" of Daoism; "Lǎozi," translatable as "venerable masters," is best

	understood as a place-holder for the early inner cultivation lineages. Daoism, in turn, has multiple source-points. A variety of figures, both human and divine, are identified as important with respect to the formation of the Daoist tradition.
Lǎozi wrote the *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power)	The *Dàodé jīng*, a.k.a. *Lǎozi* 老子 (Book of Venerable Masters), is a composite text. It is an anonymous multivocal anthology that consists of historical and textual material dating from the fourth to second centuries BEC. It contains the teachings and practices of various anonymous elders associated with the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism. Some of these historical and textual layers may have come from the oral teachings of the shadowy figure Lǎo Dān (see *Zhuāngzi*, chs. 3, 5, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 21, 23, 25, 27, 33).
The *Dàodé jīng* and *Zhuāngzi* are the only Daoist texts that matter because they are the "essence" and "original teachings" of Daoism.	There is no principal Daoist scripture. Although the *Dàodé jīng* is probably the most central and influential scripture in Daoist history, different Daoist adherents, communities and movements revere different scriptures. The primary textual collection in the Daoist tradition is called the *Dàozàng* 道藏 (Daoist Canon). It was an open textual collection, with new additions having been made throughout Daoist history. The first version was compiled in the fifth century CE. The received version was compiled in the fifteenth century, with a seventeenth century supplement. It consists of roughly 1,500 texts, texts that come from every major period and movement of Daoist history.
Daoism began with a revelation from Lǎojūn 老君 (Lord Lao) to Zhāng Dàolíng 張道陵 (fl. 140s) in 142 CE. This was the beginning of the Tiānshī 天師 (Celestial Masters) movement.	While the Tiānshī movement was formative in the establishment of Daoism as an organized religious tradition and represents one of the most important movements in Daoist history, there were Daoist adherents and communities before the Celestial Masters. Moreover, not every subsequent Daoist movement recognized Zhāng Dàolíng

	and the Celestial Masters as the source of their tradition.
Daoists, or Dao-ists, are those who love the Dao and go with the flow.	From a Daoist perspective, there are various types of religious adherence and affiliation. These involve different degrees of commitment and responsibility. The Daoist tradition consists, first and foremost, of ordained priests and monastics and lay supporters. Lineage and ordination are primary dimensions of Daoist identity and religious affiliation. This requires training under Daoist teachers and community elders with formal affiliation with the Daoist religious community and tradition. A distinction may, in turn, be may between Daoist adherents and Daoist sympathizers. In the case of Daoism in the West, one also finds various forms of spiritual appropriation, spiritual capitalism, and spiritual colonialism.
Correlative cosmology, based on yīn-yáng 陰陽, the Five Elements (*wǔxíng* 五行), and qì 氣 (*ch'ì*), is Daoist.	These concepts are not Daoist. They are part of what is best understood as "traditional Chinese cosmology" and a "traditional Chinese worldview." In pre-modern China, these concepts formed the foundation of a pan- Chinese worldview. Like other aspects of traditional Chinese culture, they formed part of the foundational Daoist worldview. Thus, correlative cosmology is not Daoist in origin or in essence.
Chinese medicine is Daoist and/or there is some form of Chinese medicine called "Daoist Medicine."	Chinese medicine is not Daoist. This misidentification, and the construct of "Daoist medicine," most often comes from a conflation of correlative cosmology (see above) with Daoism. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is, in fact, a modern form of Chinese medicine created by the Chinese Communist government and influenced by Western biomedicine and a scientific paradigm. In terms of classical Chinese medicine, there is some overlap between the two traditions, but little research has been done on this topic. We do know, however, that Daoists such as Gé Hóng 葛洪 (283-

	343), Táo Hóngjǐng 陶弘景 (456-536), Sūn Sīmiǎo 孫思邈 (581-682), and Wáng Bīng 王冰 (fl. 760s) made major contributions to Chinese medicine. They were Daoists and, in the case of Sūn and Táo, Chinese medical practitioners.
Fēngshuǐ 風水 (lit., "Wind and Water), or Chinese geomancy, is Daoist.	Fēngshuǐ is not Daoist. Like correlative cosmology (see above), it is part of what is best understood as "traditional Chinese culture." While some Daoists have utilized Fēnshuǐ throughout Chinese history, it is not Daoist in origin or essence. Using Fēngshuǐ, even so-called "Taoist Fengshui," thus does not indicate Daoist religious affiliation or identity.
Qìgōng 氣功 (Ch'ì-kūng; Energy Work/Qi Exercise) is Daoist.	Qìgōng is not Daoist. Qìgōng refers to a modern Chinese health and longevity movement aimed at national upbuilding. It combines traditional Chinese health and longevity practices with modern Chinese concerns and a Western scientific paradigm. Some of these derive from earlier Daoist Yǎngshēng 養生 (Nourishing Life) practices. There also are many different types of Qìgōng, including Buddhist, Daoist, medical, and martial. Most Daoist Qìgōng incorporates internal alchemy (*nèidān* 内丹) methods.
Sexual yoga, including the search for multiple orgasms and the practice of sexual vampirism, is Daoist.	The place of sexuality in Daoism is complex. Most of the practices identified as "Daoist sexual practices" originated in non-Daoist contexts, in imperial court circles in particular. While some Daoists have practiced "paired" or "partnered practice," often referred to as "dual cultivation" (*shuāngxiū* 雙修), a different conception of sexual intercourse was involved. Moreover, such practices almost always occurred within a larger system of alchemical transformation in which the sublimation of sexual energy was a preliminary and foundational step.

Tàijí quán 太極拳 (Tài-chí ch'üán; Great Ultimate/Yin-Yang Boxing) is Daoist.	Tàijí quán is not Daoist. It is a Chinese martial art. Like Bāguà zhǎng 八卦掌(Eight Trigram Palm) and Xíngyì quán 形意拳 (Form-Intent Boxing), it originated in non-Daoist circles. It was a nativist response aimed at national upbuilding. While some Daoists, especially Wǔdāng 武當 Daoists, practice Tàijí quán, practicing Tàijí quán does not make one a Daoist. It is, first and foremost, a martial art that is not Daoist in origin or essence.
Taoist Yoga, a.k.a. Tao Yoga, Flow Yoga or Yin Yoga, is Daoist.	"Taoist Yoga" is a misnomer, a mistaken category with no correlation to indigenous Chinese categories. Yoga is a Sanskrit technical term related to indigenous Indian practices aimed at union (*yuj*) with the divine. Most so-called "Taoist Yoga" is either modified Hatha Yoga (Western postural yoga) or derives from Chinese Wǔshù 武術 (martial arts) practices. Current research suggests that little if any so-called "Taoist Yoga" derives from Daoist Dǎoyǐn 導引 (Guided stretching; calisthenics/gymnastics) or internal alchemy (*nèidān* 內丹) practices, which are the indigenous Daoist categories.
Mount Wǔdāng 武當 is the birthplace of the soft or internal martial arts, such as Tàijí quán. Zhāng Sānfēng 張三丰 (d. 1457?), the patron saint of Mount Wǔdāng, is the creator of Tàijí quán.	Chinese "internal style" (*nèijiā* 內家) martial arts are not Daoist and do not originate in a Daoist context. Current research indicates that Wǔdāng-style martial arts represent a late imperial/early modern synthesis of Bāguà zhǎng, Tàijí quán, and Xíngyì quán. Zhāng Sānfēng is pseudo-historical.
The *Yìjīng* 易經 (*Ì-chīng*; Classic of Change) is a Daoist text. As the trigrams and hexagrams derive from it, they also are Daoist symbols.	The *Yìjīng* 易經 (Classic of Change) is not a Daoist text. It pre-dates distinct, indigenous cultural traditions like Rǔjiā 儒家 ("Confucianism") and Dàojiā 道家 ("Daoism"). From a traditional Chinese perspective, it is one of the so-called "Five Classics" of classical Confucianism, and specifically utilized as a divination manual. Throughout Chinese history, some Daoists have studied the cosmology of the *Yìjīng* and

	utilized the trigrams and hexagrams as a symbol system, especially for external and internal alchemy. However, interest in the *Yìjīng* and hexagrams/trigrams does not make one a Daoist.
Translations of the *Tào-té-chīng* by Mantak Chia, Ursula Le Guin, Stephen Mitchell, Ni Hua-ching, Solala Towler and other popularizers are accurate and provide direct access to the original teachings of Daoism	Such "translations" are not, in fact, translations, but rather "adaptations" and "versions." For example, Le Guin, Mitchell and Towler do not know classical Chinese. Moreover, such popular Western cultural productions are popular exactly because they expunge all of the culturally specific and religious dimensions of the text. Daoist scriptures (*jīng* 經) are sacred texts written in classical Chinese. Moreover, there are various Daoist views about the origin, nature and meaning of such texts. Many *jīng* are considered to be revealed and/or inspired.
Popular publications like *The Tao of Pooh* (Benjamin Hoff) as well as *Change Your Thoughts* and *Living the Wisdom of the Tao* (Wayne Dyer) provide accurate glimpses into Daoist beliefs and concerns.	Such works have no place in a serious inquiry into and an accurate understanding of the Daoism. They are part of popular Western culture, New Age spirituality, as well as self-help and pop psychology. They are part of "spiritual capitalism" and a new form of alternative spirituality best understood as "Popular Western Taoism" (PWT), with "Taoism" pronounced with a "t" sound. That movement has little to no connection with the *religious tradition which is Daoism*.

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