

Daoism (Taoism): Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

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1. Is Daoism a philosophy or a religion?

Daoism (Taoism) is an indigenous Chinese religion deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Although many equate “religion” with institutional religion, religion may be understood as a symbol system (Clifford Geertz) with diverse dimensions (Ninian Smart), including doctrinal, ethical, experiential, material, narrative, practical and social ones. One distinguishing feature is an emphasis on soteriology (ultimate purpose) and theology (sacred). As a religion, “Daoism,” the tradition of the Dao 道 (Tao), is shorthand for Daoist adherents, communities, and their religious expressions. Daoism began as a religious community, the “inner cultivation lineages” of classical Daoism (Harold Roth), during the Warring States period (480-222 BCE) and Early Han dynasty (202 BCE-9 CE). In terms of inaccurate and outdated interpretive frameworks, the distinction between so-called ~~philosophical Daoism~~ and so-called ~~religious Daoism~~, and between “Daoist philosophy” and “Daoist religion” by extension, is a modern construction rooted in indigenous Confucian, European colonialist, Christian missionary and Orientalist legacies. Use of these categories or the distinction should be taken *ipso facto* as indicative of inaccuracy and misunderstanding concerning Daoism. Daoism may also be understood through the categories of “culture,” “tradition,” and “way of life.”

2. Does the distinction between philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism derive from the indigenous Chinese categories of *dàojiā* and *dàojiào*?

This is only partially the case, and not in the sense that most people assert or assume. The equation of so-called ~~philosophical Daoism~~ with *dàojiā* 道家 (*tao-chia*) and so-called ~~religious Daoism~~ with *dàojiào* 道教 (*tao-chiao*) is a modern fiction. *Dàojiā* literally means “Family of the Dao,” while *dàojiào* literally means “Teachings of the Dao.” Both emphasize the Daoist cosmological and theological concept of the Dao 道 (Tao), the sacred or ultimate concern of Daoists. The terms have a complex history. Briefly stated, *dàojiā* first appeared as a taxonomic category during the Early Han dynasty (202 BCE-9 CE); it was primarily a way of categorizing Daoist texts. Shortly thereafter, Daoists began using it as a name for their religious tradition, especially ordained Daoist priests (*dàoshi* 道士) and their associated communities. *Dàojiào* was first coined during the Period of Disunion (220-589) as another designation for the Daoist tradition; it was primarily used as a way to distinguish Daoism from Buddhism (*fójiào* 佛教). In that context, so-called *dàojiào* included so-called *dàojiā*.

3. Is there such a thing as “Daoist philosophy”?

It depends on what one means by “philosophy” (lit., “love of wisdom”). If one means disembodied ideas and “thought,” or independent discourse that privileges rationality and intellectualism, then there is no such thing as “Daoist philosophy.” However, we may recognize philosophical

dimensions of Daoism. From this perspective, Daoist philosophy is rooted in a larger worldview, especially one that emphasizes an existential, soteriological and theological orientation. If there is such a thing as Daoist philosophy, it tends to be embodied, practice-based, and experiential. In addition, Daoist philosophy cannot be separated from the larger parameters of Daoist religious adherence. It is part of the doctrinal dimension (Ninian Smart) and symbol system (Clifford Geertz) of Daoism. It is also important to understand that there are complex cultural and historical factors influencing the construction of Daoism as “thought” (*sīxiǎng* 思想) and “philosophy” (*zhéxué* 哲學), including colonialist, missionary and Orientalist legacies.

4. Is “Daoism” just a Western construction?

On some level, “Daoism” is a Western construction. “Daoism” is an English name used to designate an indigenous Chinese religion. However, from a more sophisticated perspective, and beyond simplistic post-modern ideas and hyper-relativism, the Western category of “Daoism” approximates a variety of indigenous Chinese technical terms. These include *dàojiā* 道家 (“Family of the Dao”), *dàojiào* 道教 (“Teachings of the Dao”), *xuánfēng* 玄風 (“Mysterious Movement”), and so forth. Like the English name, most of these indigenous Chinese names emphasize the Daoist cosmological and theological concept of Dao 道 (Tao). (*Xuán* 玄 [“mysterious”] is a character used by Daoists to describe the Dao.) We may thus think of “Daoism” as the Tradition of the Dao. It is shorthand for Daoist adherents, communities, and their religious expressions. In this respect, it is important to recognize that the abstract and general category of “Daoism” includes diverse movements and lineages. The tradition is at once singular and plural, diverse and unified.

5. When did Daoism begin?

As a religious community, Daoism began during the Warring States period (480-222 BCE) and Early Han dynasty (202 BCE-9 CE). These were the “inner cultivation lineages” of classical Daoism (Harold Roth). These loosely-associated master-disciple communities commingled with other Chinese cultural trends, especially *Fāngshì* 方士 (lit., “formula masters”; magico-religious practitioners) lineages, to influence the emergence of organized Daoism during the Later Han dynasty (25-220). As an organized religion, Daoism began in the Later Han dynasty.

6. Is Laozi the founder of Daoism?

No. There is no founder of Daoism. If one must use the category of “founder,” the account must be plural, not singular. It is more appropriate to speak of founders of particular communities, movements and lineages. In addition, *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (“Master Lao”) is a pseudo-historical figure. This has been conclusively demonstrated through critical and revisionist scholarship (A.C. Graham; D.C. Lau). From an informed perspective, “Laozi” is perhaps best understood as a symbolic representation of and place-holder for the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism. In terms of the Daoist tradition, Laozi is venerated as a sage, the attributed author of the *Dàodé jīng*, and the most important representative of classical Daoism. In other contexts, he became deified as the god *Lǎojūn* 老君 (Lord Lao) or identified as an incarnation of Lord Lao. Various texts were claimed to be revelations from him.

7. Did Daoism begin with the Tiānshī movement in the Later Han dynasty?

No. Although some scholars, especially under the influence of modern Taiwanese Zhèngyī 正一 (Orthodox Unity) Daoists and the scholar Michel Strickmann (Michael Strickman; 1942-1994), claim that Daoism began with the Tiānshī 天師 (Celestial Masters), that movement was only one, albeit the most important one, of a series of early Daoist communities. These communities became the foundation of organized Daoism, or the emergence of a fully integrated religious tradition. To claim that the Celestial Masters movement is the beginning of Daoism is retrospective and incomplete history. In addition, many Daoists have not and do not privilege the Celestial Masters movement, or its nominal founder Zhāng Dào líng 張道陵 (fl. 140s CE), in the history of Daoism.

8. How do Daoists understand Daoism?

This depends on the particular historical period, community, and movement. Generally speaking, Daoists understand Daoism as the Tradition of the Dao, with the Dao 道 being the sacred or ultimate concern of Daoists. Daoists generally have an inclusive view of tradition, recognizing diverse communities, movements, lineages, forms of practice-realization, and ways of life as constituent of the tradition. Daoists often think about tradition in terms of the external Three Treasures (*wài sānbǎo* 外三寶) of the Dao 道, scriptures (*jīng* 經), and teachers (*shī* 師).

9. Who is a Daoist?

Daoists are adherents of the religious tradition which is Daoism. “Daoist” is an imprecise English category that approximates a variety of indigenous Chinese concepts. There are different types of adherence with varying degrees of commitment and responsibility. First and foremost, Daoism is comprised of ordained Daoist priests and monastics (*dàoshi* 道士). These individuals sometimes are referred to as “Daoist elders” (*dào zhang* 道長). Some Daoist priests are householders (*zàijiā* 在家); they often have families, consume alcohol, and eat meat in conformity with traditional Chinese cultural trends. Other Daoist priests are monastics (*chūjiā* 出家); they are celibate, renounce intoxicants, and observe vegetarianism. In either case, the primary responsibility of Daoist priests is community leadership, spiritual direction, ritual, and so forth. Monastics tend to live in seclusion from the larger society; they follow a communal way of life, with meditation and study tending to be the primary forms of practice. “Ordinary” or “lay Daoists” (*dào rén* 道人) are the vast majority of adherents. Traditionally speaking, they tend to support the clergy and larger community. They tend to practice popular morality and theistic devotionism. In the context of modern global Daoism, “ordinary Daoists” often practice meditation, Qigong, Taiji quan, and so forth.

10. Does one have to know Chinese to be a Daoist?

It depends. Historically speaking, classical Chinese is the literary and liturgical language of Daoism, while spoken Chinese, albeit with different historical pronunciations and in various dialects, is the spoken language of Daoism. This means that Chinese is required for certain Daoist activities. For example, all of the major Daoist texts were written in classical Chinese. Traditionally speaking, these were unpunctuated texts written from top-to-bottom and right-to-left

using traditional characters. In addition, Daoist ritual is usually conducted in Chinese. Knowledge of Chinese also clarifies the meaning of Daoist technical vocabulary, and deepens Daoist practice by extension. Moreover, modern Mandarin is currently the unifying language of modern global Daoism. Most modern Chinese Daoists only speak Mandarin or other Chinese dialects. At the same time, Daoism is now a global religious tradition characterized by cultural, ethnic, linguistic and national diversity. Although Chinese remains the source-language of Daoism, Daoism is now a multilingual tradition.

11. Does one have to be ordained or part of a lineage to be a Daoist?

As mentioned, some Daoists are ordained and have lineage. Clergy and monastics tend to emphasize the importance of ordination and lineage. This stands in contrast to most lay Daoists, although there are initiated lay Daoists who have lineage-affiliation. Ordination and lineage are just two possible “ways to affiliation” in Daoism; others include training, revelation, and mystical experience. Moreover, most of the founders of particular movements and lineages were not ordained Daoists. In addition, in the modern world, many Daoists, especially under the influence of TCM schools and Qigong organizations, are using ordination and lineage as a form of certification, as a means of self-legitimation and promotion. This includes various fictitious lineages, fabricated ordinations, and a rhetoric of “tradition.”

12. Are Daoists individuals who believe in the “Dao”?

Not exactly. Belief in the Dao is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for being a Daoist. In addition, the Dao is a Daoist cosmological and theological category informed by specific Daoist views, practices, and experiences. Still further, “belief” is a complex issue in Daoism. Daoists tend to emphasize practice and experience over belief. Overemphasis on belief may obscure one’s understanding of Daoism. Daoists often emphasize the importance of affinity, connection, community, embodiment, lineage, ordination, tradition, and so forth.

13. Is the Dao a universal name for the sacred or ultimate reality?

No. “Dao” (“Tao”) is, first and foremost, a Chinese character (道) that may mean “way,” “path,” “to travel,” “to speak,” and so forth. In terms of Ancient/Old Chinese, the character was probably pronounced something like *d’ôg; in modern Mandarin, it is pronounced *dao*. In addition, *dao* was a common term during the Warring States period (480-222 BCE) and Early Han dynasty (202 BCE-9 CE). In that context, different teachers, communities, and cultural traditions used it to designate their existential approaches (“ways”). Classical Daoists adopted the character as a designation for the sacred or ultimate reality (“Way”). As a *Daoist* cosmological and theological category, the Dao has four primary characteristics: (1) Source of everything (*yuán* 元/原); (2) Unnamable mystery (*xuán* 玄); (3) All-pervading sacred presence (*qi* 氣); and (4) Universe as transformative process (*huà* 化) (“Nature”). Moreover, from a Daoist perspective, “Dao” is simply a place-holder for the nameless mystery of . For individuals searching for a universal name for the sacred, “Mystery,” “One,” or “Reality” would be a better choice than “Dao.” Use of “Dao” without a corresponding recognition of the Daoist tradition is a form of cultural appropriation, colonialism, and domestication.

14. What is the most important Daoist text?

This is a complex question. Generally speaking, there are movement-specific textual corpuses. These often relate to particular revelations. Different Daoists and Daoist communities and lineages tend to emphasize different texts. More broadly considered, the primary Daoist textual collection is known as the *Dào-zàng* 道藏 (*Tào-tsàng*; Daoist Canon), which more literally means “storehouse of the Dao.” The received Daoist Canon was printed in 1445, with a supplement appearing in 1607. This collection includes about 1,500 texts, many of which consist of ritual manuals and talismans. It would thus be an unreasonable exercise, not to mention an impossible task, to translate the entire collection. If one had to identify a single important Daoist text, it would probably be the *Dào-dé jīng* 道德經 (*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), which is one of the most influential texts from classical Daoism. However, there are Daoist and “non-Daoist” interpretations (and translations) of the *Dào-dé jīng*. Daoists have tended to read the text under the guidance of Daoist teachers, in the context of Daoist communities, and/or with the assistance of Daoist commentaries. (Contrary to popular belief, the *Yì-jīng* 易經 (*Ì-chīng*; Classic of Change) is not a Daoist text.)

15. Did Lǎozǐ write the *Dào-dé jīng*?

No. As mentioned, Lǎozǐ (Lǎo-tzu) was a pseudo-historical figure. The *Dào-dé jīng* 道德經 (*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power) is a multi-vocal anthology with a variety of historical and textual layers. The text most likely began in seminal form as a collection of aphorisms during the Warring States period (480-222 BCE). It collects the teachings and practices of various anonymous teachers of the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism. The text was originally titled the *Lǎozǐ* 老子, which is conventionally translated as the *Book of Master Lao*, but better understood as the *Book of Venerable Masters*. It eventually became codified and edited by at least 168 BCE. It received the honorific title of *Dào-dé jīng* around 150 BCE. The standard edition of the text, the “received text,” is that of Wáng Bì 王弼 (*Wáng Pì*; 226-249), a member of the Xuánxué 玄學 (Hsüán-hsüéh; Profound Learning) Daoist hermeneutical movement and quasi-salon. This edition consists of eighty-one, untitled “verse-chapters.”

16. Are there reliable translations of Daoist texts?

Not many. Outside of the relentless and unnecessary translation of the *Dào-dé jīng* by the “Tao-te-ching translation industry,” few Daoist texts have been rendered into reliable translations with sufficient elucidation. In terms of the *Dào-dé jīng*, some reliable translations include those of Addiss and Lombardo, Henricks, Komjathy, LaFargue, Lau, and so forth. Reliable translations of the *Zhuāngzi* 莊子 (*Chuāng-tzu*; Book of Master Zhuang) include those of Graham, Mair, and Watson. More recently, a wider array of Daoist texts has been translated by Bokenkamp, Company, Hendrichske, Kohn, Komjathy, Pregadio, Roth, and so forth. When considering the reliability of translations, one must consider the training, linguistic proficiency, motivations, and audience of the translator. One must remember that a source-text written in classical Chinese is behind the translation. It is the extent to which the translation maintains a connection with and provides an accurate approximation of the source-text that determines reliability. This is not to mention the translator’s depth of understanding and sophistication of interpretation.

17. Is Chinese correlative cosmology (yin-yang/Five Elements), Fengshui, Qigong, sexual yoga, Taiji quan, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the *Yijing*, etc. Daoist?

No. Each of these has a complex history, but none of them is Daoist in origin or essence. Things like correlative cosmology and Fēngshuǐ 風水 (lit., “wind and water”; Chinese geomancy) are best understood as part of “traditional Chinese cosmology,” “traditional Chinese worldview,” or “traditional Chinese culture.” Historically speaking, Daoists, like other members of the dominant pre-modern Chinese society, utilized them. In a modern context, some Daoists practice things like Qìgōng 氣功 (Ch’i-kūng; Energy Work/Qi Exercises) and Tàijí quán 太極拳 (T’ài-chí ch’üán; Great Ultimate/Yin-Yang Boxing), but practicing these does not make one a Daoist. They are part of a shared repertoire of modern Chinese and global health and fitness movements. In a modern context, many individuals also attach the adjective “Daoist” to some of these cultural practices in order to increase their status and marketability. This begs the question of whether or not there are specifically Daoist forms of practice.

18. How does one find a Daoist master and what’s involved?

Who knows? Perhaps one ceases looking for a “Daoist master,” or at least the “Oriental Monk.” If by “Daoist master” one means a formal teacher (*shīfu* 師父)-student (*dizi* 弟子; *túdi* 徒弟) relationship, it is a matter of affinity, dedication, fortune, and sincerity, among other factors. One can search, but there is no guarantee of discovery or acceptance. If one happens to find a trustworthy teacher who accepts one as a disciple, one traditionally engages in intensive training. This may result in ordination and formal lineage-affiliation. However, in a modern global context, one must recognize that people can buy ordination certificates, without the requisite training, for the right price. There are many self-identified “Daoist masters” who lack deep understanding, practice, and experience. They are “masters” without mastery. From a traditional perspective, the title of *shīfu* 師父, literally “teacher-father,” is an honorific form of address. It is bestowed by one’s students and associates based on one’s level of accomplishment. It is not a self-given title. How much more should this be the case with “master”?

19. Can one live in a Daoist monastery in China?

Generally speaking, the answer is no, although new “diploma mills” and “degree programs” are beginning to emerge. Such an opportunity is complicated by a number of factors. First, mainland Chinese Daoist monasteries are monitored by the Bureau of Religious Affairs and Bureau of Tourism. It is nearly impossible, and also dangerous and problematic for the resident monastics, to allow “non-Chinese” people, especially non-monastic foreigners, to stay in monasteries. The centers that do allow such opportunities tend to be money-making operations under the direction of unscrupulous teachers. Second, most mainland Chinese Daoist monastics only speak Mandarin or other Chinese dialects. One must be proficient in modern Mandarin to communicate.

FURTHER READING

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