

Basic Information Sheet on Daoism (Taoism)

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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 Dào 道 as sacred and ultimate concern. This is expressed in indigenous Chinese designations, including *dàojiā* 道家 (Family of the Dao), *dàojiào* 道教 (Teachings of the Dao), *dàoshi* 道士 (adept of the Dao), and *xuánfēng* 玄風 (Mysterious Movement). That is, Daoists have understood themselves as those who “transmit the Dao” (*chuándào* 傳道); they have seen themselves as part of the “tradition of the Dao” (*dàotǒng* 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, fictions, and fabrications.

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 and now internationally. 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 engaged in and taught 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 Dào 道/衛, pronounced something like *kə.lʰuʔ (Karlgren: *d'ōg) in Ancient/Old Chinese, is the sacred or ultimate concern of Daoists. From a Daoist perspective, there are four primary characteristics of the Dao: (1) Source (*yuán* 元); (2) Unnamable mystery (*xuán* 玄); (3) All-pervading sacred presence (*líng* 靈; also *qì* 氣); (4) Universe as cosmological process (Nature) (*huà* 化). The Dao is impersonal, amoral, and ineffable. Through a spontaneous, impersonal process, the Dao moved from primordial nondifferentiation to differentiation (the manifest world). Daoist “theology” thus emphasizes emanation and immanence. It is 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 Daoist adherents, communities and movements revere different individuals and scriptures. Generally speaking, **Lǎozǐ** 老子 (Lǎo-tzǔ; “Master Lao”) receives a place of veneration, but Lǎozǐ is pseudo-historical and mythological. He is a composite figure. In terms of influential scriptures, the **Dàodé jīng** 道德經 (*Tào-té-chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), also known by its earliest title of *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (*Lǎo-tzǔ*; Book of Venerable Masters), has perhaps been most central and influential. Although attributed to Lǎozǐ, the text is, in fact, an anonymous multivocal anthology consisting of material from at least the fourth to second centuries BCE. It contains the teachings and practices of various anonymous elders associated with the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism, the earliest Daoist religious community. We know this because of actual archaeology discoveries and because of textual archaeology. The standard received edition of the *Dàodé jīng*, consisting of eighty-one “verse-chapters,” was redacted by Wáng Bì 王弼 (226-249), a member of the early medieval quasi-eremitic salon and hermeneutical movement known as Xuánxué 玄學 (Profound Learning). The latter is referred to as so-called “Neo-Daoism” in outdated and inaccurate Orientalist constructions of Daoism.

The primary textual collection in the Daoist tradition is called **the Dàoàng** 道藏 (Daoist Canon), which more literally means “storehouse of the Dao.” 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 *Dàodé jīng*, *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuāng), 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 *Tiānshī* 天師 (Celestial Masters), which was founded by *Zhāng Dàolíng* 張道陵 (fl. 140s CE). Also called *Zhèngyī* 正一 (Orthodox Unity), this is a householder 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 into China from Central Asia. Other key movements in early organized Daoism include *Tàiqīng* 太清 (Great Clarity), *Shàngqīng* 上清 (Highest Clarity), and *Língbǎo* 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 *Quánzhān* 全真 (Complete Perfection), which was founded by *Wáng Zhé* 王嘉 (*Chóngyáng* 重陽 [Redoubled Yang]; 1113-1170). It is a monastic tradition that emphasizes celibacy (no sex), sobriety (no intoxicants), and vegetarianism (no meat). Other key movements include various internal alchemy (*nèidān* 內丹) 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 also is 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.

- *Tiānshī* 天師 (T’iēn-shīh; Celestial Masters). A.k.a. *Zhèngyī* 正一 (Chèng-ī; Orthodox Unity). Begins in 2nd c. CE with a revelation from *Lǎojūn* 老君 (Lord Lao), the deified *Lǎozǐ* and personification of the Dao, to *Zhāng Dàolíng* 張道陵 (fl. 140s CE). Originally CM was a patrilineal position via the *Zhāng* 張 family. Householder (married priests), community/village-based (rural), and ritualistic. Often wear Western dress and short hair.

- Quánzhēn 全真 (Ch'üán-chēn; Complete Perfection). A.k.a. Complete Reality. Begins in 12th c. with Wáng Zhé's 王嘉 (Chóngyáng 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 Lóngmén 龍門 (Dragon Gate) lineage under Wáng Chángyuè 王常月 (Kūnyáng 崑陽 [Paradisiacal Yang]; 1622-1680). Primarily monastic (celibacy, sobriety, vegetarianism), monasteries, and meditative and ritualistic. Its headquarters is at Báiyún guàn 白雲觀 (White Cloud Monastery; Beijing). Also includes lay initiates.
- Also other monastic and family lineages.

Key Figures

- Like Hinduism, NO FOUNDER → Movements and lineages with influential figures and principal teachers
- Early master-disciples, with Lǎozǐ and Zhuāngzǐ being most famous
- **Lǎozǐ** 老子 (Master Lao; trad. dat. 6th c. BCE). “Old Master.” Lǐ Ěr 李耳 & Lǎo Dān 老聃/聃/儋. Pseudo-historical. Attributed author of *Dàodé jīng*
- **Zhuāngzǐ** 莊子 (Master Zhuāng; ca. 370-ca. 290 BCE). Zhuāng Zhōu 莊周. Teachings contained in so-called Inner Chapters (chs. 1-7) of the *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuāng)
- **Zhāng Dào líng** 張道陵 (fl. 140s CE). Founder of Celestial Master movement and 1st Celestial Master
- **Lǚ Dòngbīn** 呂洞賓 (Chúnyáng 純陽 [Pure Yang]; b. 796?). Most famous immortal in Daoist history
- **Wáng Zhé** 王嘉 (Chóngyáng 重陽 [Redoubled Yang]; 1113-1170). Founder of Complete Perfection movement and 1st Patriarch (cf. Chan/Zen).
 - Also **Seven Perfected** (Mǎ, Qiū, Sūn), Wáng Zhé's seven senior Shāndōng 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
- Different texts emphasized in different Daoist movements and lineages, although the *Dàodé jīng* is probably the most influential text in the Daoist tradition. Also lineage-specific (diversity)
- **Dào zàng** 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
- *Dàodé jīng* and *Zhuāngzǐ* most influential/foundational
- **Dàodé jīng** 道德經 (*Tào-té-chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power). A.k.a. *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (Book of Venerable Masters), which is conventionally translated as “Book of Master Lao.” Attributed to Lǎozǐ (pseudo-historical). **Anthology**. **Received edition** 81 chapters (poetic stanzas). Many historical and textual layers. **Multivocal** and **polysemic** (multiple significations) anthology

- **Zhuāngzǐ** 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang). Also known as *Nánhuá zhēnjīng* 南華真經 (Perfect Scripture of Master Nánhuá), with Nánhuá 南華 (Southern Florescence) being an honorific name for Zhuāngzǐ. **Multi-vocal anthology**. **Received edition** 33 chapters (prose). Parables and stories. Many historical and textual layers. **Inner Chapters** associated with teachings and writings of ZZ
- **Daoist readings and views**. Also commentaries
- **NOT Yijīng** 易經 (Classic of Change)
- **Also not Tao of Pooh** (Benjamin Hoff), *Wisdom of Tao* (Wayne Dyer), or *Tao Te Ching* by Mantak Chia, Ursula Le Guin, Stephen Mitchell, Solala Towler, and similar popularizers. 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 Lǎojūn 老君 (Lord Lao) and Sānqīng 三清 (Three Purities)
- **Cosmogony/cosmology**. Emanation. From primordial nondifferentiation to differentiation. Spontaneous, amoral, 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 as manifestations of the Dao. Innate nature. Also knot anthropocentric. More theocentric, cosmocentric, and geocentric. Also shared animality
- **Key values/concerns**. Non-action (*wúwéi* 無為; also practice), clarity-and-stillness, contentment, desirelessness, flexibility, namelessness (invisibility/unknowability), non-contention, non-knowing, simplicity, and yielding
- **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. Zhāi-purification and Jiào-offering/renewal rites
- For members of **Complete Perfection**, meditation and ritual are primary. Also celibacy (no sex), sobriety (no intoxicants), and vegetarianism (no meat) as core vows and commitments
 - Meditation. Diverse. (1) Quiet sitting (apophatic/emptiness-based meditation); (2) Internal alchemy

- Ritual. Bowing. Scripture recitation. Chanting liturgy. Occasionally large public rituals (*zhāi* 齋 & *jiào* 醮). Also *chànhuǐ* 懺悔 (atonement/repentance)
- 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** (*yuánfēn* 緣分)
- **NOT** Chinese medicine, Fēngshuǐ 風水 (Chinese geomancy), Qìgōng (Ch'ì-kūng; Energy Work/Qi Exercise), sexual yoga, Tàijí quán 太極拳 (T'ài-chí ch'üán; Great Ultimate/Yin-Yang Boxing), “Taoist/Yin Yoga,” etc. **Some connection, relevance, and applicability**

Sacred Sites (also Pilgrimage Sites) and Architecture

- Ancestral Halls: (1) Lóuguàn 樓觀/Lookout Tower Monastery (Zhōuzhī, Shǎnxī); (2) Chóngyáng gōng 重陽宮 /Palace of Chóngyáng (Hùyì, Shǎnxī); (3) Lóngmén dòng 龍門洞/Dragon Gate Grotto (near Lǒngxiàn, Shǎnxī)
- Lónghǔ shān 龍虎山/Dragon-Tiger Mountain (near Yīngtán, Jiāngxī). Contains Tiānshī fǔ 天師府 (Mansion of the Celestial Master). Becomes prominent after Táng dynasty (618-907)
- Báiyún guàn 白雲觀/White Cloud Monastery (Běijīng). Zhōngguó dàojiào xiéhuì 中國道教協會 (Chinese Daoist/Taoist Association), part of the PRC Bureau of Religious Affairs
- 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 and non-specialist publications, even by self-identified Daoists (“Tao-ists”).

- Making a distinction between so-called “philosophical Daoism” and so-called “religious Daoism.” Daoism was a religious community from the beginning
- Essentializing classical Daoism as “original Daoism.” There’s no such thing
- Identifying Lǎozǐ as the founder of Daoism. Lǎozǐ is mythological and pseudo-historical
- Identifying the *Dàodé jīng* as authored by Lǎozǐ. The *Dàodé jīng* is a multi-vocal anthology that consists of various historical and textual layers

- Identifying any of the following as Daoist: Chinese medicine, Fēngshuǐ, Qìgōng (Ch’i-kūng), sexual yoga, Tàijí quán (Tài-chí ch’üán), “Tao/Taoist/Yin Yoga,” the *Yìjīng* (*I-chīng*), yin-yang, and so forth
- Using inaccurate translations of the *Dàodé jīng* (e.g., Mantak Chia, Stephen Mitchell, Ursula Le Guin, Solala Towler). Accurate translations include those of Stephen Addiss (literary/poetic), Louis Komjathy (literary/historical/practical), Michael LaFargue (historical/practical), 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

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