

Essential Daoism (Taoism)

Louis Komjathy 康思奇, Ph.D.

Center for Daoist Studies 道學中心

PRELIMINARY ORIENTATIONS

- Daoism as the “Tradition of the Dao”
- Indigenous names: Dàojiā 道家 (Family of the Dao), Dàojiào 道教 (Teachings of the Dao), Xuánfēng 玄風 (Mysterious Movement), etc.
- Daoism as indigenous Chinese religion rooted in traditional Chinese culture
- Daoism as a religious tradition characterized by diversity and inclusivity
- No founder or authoritative text → Founders of specific lineages and movements. Different Daoist texts receive a place of veneration in different Daoist movements
- No authoritarian institution, centralized religious leader, or orthodox beliefs
- Not a missionary religion and very little interest in conversion (“affinity”)
- Now global religious tradition characterized by cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and national diversity

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

- Orientation toward the Dao (see below)
- Primary language: Classical Chinese (traditional characters). Daoist scriptures as texts written in classical Chinese
- Tradition as the external Three Treasures: The Dao, the scriptures, and the teachers. Interrelated
- Strong emphasis on community, connection, cultivation, embodiment, lineage, ordination, place, practice, teachers, training, tradition, and transmission
- Various types of Daoist community, including eremitic, householder and monastic
- Daoism is generally divided into movements/schools/sub-traditions, lineages, and even sub-lineages
- Considered from an integrated and comprehensive perspective, Daoist training includes aesthetics, dietetics, ethics, health and longevity practice, meditation, ritual, scripture study, and so forth
- There are thus many viable paths to the Dao, including diverse forms of contemplative practice
- Affiliation and adherence
 - Daoist as an adherent of Daoism, as a member of the religious tradition *which is* Daoism
 - Orientation towards the Dao as necessary, but not sufficient condition
 - Distinction among ordained Daoist priests and monastics, lay adherents, and sympathizers
 - Importance of lineage and ordination
 - Also recognition of revelation and mystical experience

COGMOGONIC, COSMOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL VIEWS

- Cosmogony (origins of the universe), cosmology (underlying patterns, principles, and structure of the universe), and theology (conception of the sacred)
- **Daoist Theology**
 - Dào 道 (*d'ôg) as sacred and ultimate concern of Daoists
 - Four primary characteristics: (1) Source of everything; (2) Unnamable mystery; (3) All-pervading sacred presence (qi); and (4) Universe as cosmological process
 - Primary Daoist theology: Monistic, pantheistic, and panenhenic. Also apophatic
 - Secondary Daoist theology: Animistic and polytheistic
- **Daoist Cosmogony**
 - Dao as unrepresentable before. Primordial nondifferentiation. Unknowable
 - Spontaneous impersonal change (Source) → differentiation (manifest universe)
 - Emanation and immanence

- No agency, no intentionality, no design. Structure as random configuration
- No “good” and “evil”
- **Daoist Cosmology**
 - Universe as impersonal, amoral transformative process based on yin-yang interaction (“traditional Chinese cosmology”; shared worldview)
 - Change and transformation as the only constant
 - World-affirming view: Body, nature, world, and universe as manifestations of the Dao

HISTORICAL PERIODIZATION

- Three primary historical divisions (“periods”)
 - (1) Classical Daoism (4th-2nd c. BCE). Major movement: Early inner cultivation lineages (master-disciple communities). Major texts: *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power) and *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (*Chuāng-tzū*; Book of Master Zhuang). Emphasis placed on apophatic meditation and mystical union with the Dao
 - (2) Early organized Daoism (2nd-7th c. CE). Major movement: Tiānshī 天師 (Celestial Masters). Major texts: *Lǎozǐ xiǎng’ěr zhù* 老子想爾注 (Commentary Thinking Through the *Laozi*). Emphasis placed on moral purity, theocratic community, and communal ritual. Householder tradition with married priests (men and women) living in local communities and performing ritual
 - (3) Later organized Daoism (7th c. CE-present). Major movement: Quánzhēn 全真 (Complete Perfection), especially its later Lóngmén 龍門 (Dragon Gate) lineage. Major texts: *Chóngyáng lìjiào shíwǔ lùn* 重陽立教十五論 (Master Redoubled Yang’s Fifteen Discourses to Establish the Teachings). Emphasis placed on asceticism, meditation, and alchemical transformation. Renunciant and monastic tradition with monastics (monks and nuns committed to celibacy [no sex], sobriety [no intoxicants], and vegetarianism [no meat]) living regimented life in hermitages and monasteries

MODELS OF PRACTICE AND ATTAINMENT

- Soteriology (ultimate goal of a given adherent or community). May include actualization, divinization, liberation, perfection, realization, salvation, etc.
- Diverse models of practice and attainment
 - Aesthetic, alchemical, ascetic, communal, cosmological, dietetic, ecstatic, ethical, existential, hermeneutical, meditative, mediumistic, monastic, mystical, quietistic, ritualistic, solitary, syncretistic, therapeutic, etc.
 - Combined by different Daoists and Daoist communities in different ways
 - Many ways (*dào*) to the Way (Dao)
- Two primary models of practice: Meditative and ritualistic

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS VERSUS INFORMED VIEWS

- Not the modern fiction and popular construction of so-called ~~philosophical Daoism~~ and so-called ~~religious Daoism~~
 - Religious tradition. Historical periodization and models of practice and attainment (diversity and complexity)
- Not Protestant Christianity (individualism, anti-clericalism, anti-institutionalism)
 - Closer resemblance to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Orthodox Judaism, and Roman Catholicism (“tradition”)
- Not emphasis on founder and central text
 - Different founders, lineages, movements and important texts (diversity and inclusivity)
- See “Common Misconceptions about Daoism” by Louis Komjathy (Center for Daoist Studies)