Posted on the Alternate Homepage of Dr. Louis Komjathy (www.louiskomjathy.com). September 1, 2023.

A Primer on Quánzhēn 全眞 (Complete Perfection) Daoism

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

Quánzhēn 全眞 (Ch'üán-chēn; Complete Perfection; a.k.a. "Complete Reality") began as a local alchemical, ascetic, contemplative, eremitic, and mystical community in the late twelfth century. At that time, Quánzhēn primarily consisted of solitary ascetics and hermits engaging in intensive meditation and associated psychosomatic purification and transformation. These individuals primarily lived in semi-permanent hermitages (*ān* 庵/菴) and temporary meditation enclosures (*huándǔ* 環堵), including Wáng Zhé's namesake Quánzhēn ān 全眞庵/全眞菴 (Hermitage of Complete Perfection). Quánzhēn became a regional movement in northern China (Shǎnxī-Shāndōng) shortly after its initial formation. In this moment, adherence, affiliation, and participation were more diverse and inclusive, including both formal renunciant-affiliates and a larger lay community consisting of adherents and sympathizers. The larger community centered on various Daoist associations (*huì* 會), which also are referred to in English as "congregations" and "meeting-halls."

The name Quánzhēn derives from the "Dào Zhí 盜跖" (Thief Zhi) chapter (ch. 29) of the anonymous/pseudonymous fourth-second century BCE *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (*Chuāng-tzǔ*; Book of Master Zhuang), which is a key work associated with the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism. There the contextual meaning is something like "completely true," and this meaning informs the later sectarian dimension of the phrase. As in other parallel technical terms like *xiūzhēn* 修眞 ("cultivating perfection") and *zhēnrén* 眞人 ("Perfected"), the Quánzhēn contextual meaning is best understood as "complete perfection." Here *zhēn* 眞/真 ("perfect/perfected/perfection"), which also is translated as "authentic," "real," or "true," relates to internal alchemy (*nèidān* 內丹), specifically as alchemical refinement and transmutation resulting in becoming an immortal (*xiānrén* 仙人). Under one etymological reading, the character consists of *bǐ* 匕 ("spoon") and *dǐng* 鼎 ("crucible/tripod"). It originally designated a ritual and even sacrificial vessel, but later referred to a key alchemical apparatus. Thus, from a Daoist perspective, the character invokes alchemical transmutation along the lines of *xiūliàn* 修煉 ("cultivation-and-refinement"), also referred to as "ascesis." That is, "complete perfection" is actualized by "cultivating the Dao" (*xiūdào* 修道) and "refining the elixir" (*liàndān* 煉丹).

Quánzhēn was founded by Wáng Zhé 王嚞 (Chóngyáng 重陽 [Redoubled Yang]; 1113-1170) and his senior disciples. The latter are conventionally discussed as the Seven Perfected (*qīzhēn* 七眞). These individuals established various hermitages and associations throughout northern China, especially in Shāndōng (northeastern China). Quánzhēn in turn became a Daoist monastic order under Qiū Chǔjī 丘處機 (Chángchūn 長春 [Perpetual Spring]; 1148-1227), the youngest and last-surviving first-generation disciple of Wáng Zhé, with the support of his own senior disciples.

In contemporary mainland China, Quánzhēn is one of two surviving forms of institutional Daoism. It is a monastic order comprised of ordained Daoist monastics and priests (*dàoshì* 道士), with

some associated lay initiates and a larger supporting lay community. It consists of seven lineages honorifically associated with the Seven Perfected. Of these, Lóngmén is the largest and most well-known, with its affiliates serving as religious administrators for most of the major Daoist temples and monasteries throughout mainland China. The official lineage was established by Wáng Chángyuè 王常月 (Kūnyáng 崑陽 [Paradisiacal Yang]; 1622?-1680), who was abbot of Báiyún guàn 白雲觀 (White Cloud Monastery; Běijīng) during the early Qīng dynasty (1644-1911). As fully articulated and maintained, Lóngmén's primary charism (spiritual signature) centers on ethics, specifically the study and application of Daoist precepts (*dàojiè* 道戒).

Considered as a whole, Quánzhēn consists of the following key defining characteristics:

• **Three Vows** (*sānshì* 三誓; *sānméng* 三盟), namely, celibacy (no sex), sobriety (no intoxicants), and vegetarianism (no meat), with celibacy understood as sexual propriety for "non-monastics" and vegetarianism often being closer to veganism (no animal products). From a lived Quánzhēn Daoist perspective, the commitment of *chūjiā* 出家 (lit., "leave the family") may be understood as *chúsú* 除俗 ("abandon the mundane").

• ***Xiūliàn*** 修煉 ("cultivation-and-refinement"). Intensive and prolonged Daoist training leading to complete psychosomatic transformation. This includes both quietistic and alchemical forms of meditation with an accompanying "energetics of being and experiencing" focusing on the Daoist "subtle body."

• **Core Three Scriptures** (*sānjīng* 三經), namely, the anonymous/pseudonymous fourth-second century BCE *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (*Tào-té chīng*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power; HDP #2), anonymous sixth-century *Yīnfú jīng* 陰符經 (Scripture on the Hidden Talisman; HDP #7), and anonymous eighth-century *Qīngjìng jīng* 清靜經 (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness; HDP #4). For many Quánzhēn Daoists, there is an accompanying commitment to formal scripture study (*jīngxué* 經學).

• **Daoist religious names** (*dàohào* 道號; *fǎmíng* 法名) based on one of the lineage-poems (*pàishī* 派詩) associated with the seven primary Quánzhēn lineages. In addition to indicating formal affiliation, said names locate a given Quánzhēn Daoist in relation to transmission lines associated with a specific master-father (*shūfu* 師父).

• Although the primary daily Quánzhēn communal monastic practice centers on **chanting the liturgy** (*gōngkè* 功課; lit., "meritorious lesson"; also "homework") in front of the main temple altar (*tán* 壇) in the morning and evening, the vast majority of committed Quánzhēn Daoists focus on inner cultivation and monastic discipline. Note also that the liturgy is Quánzhēn, *not* Lóngmén.

FURTHER READING

Eskildsen, Stephen. 2004. *The Teachings and Practices of the Early Quanzhen Taoist Masters*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Esposito, Monica (1962-2011). 2014. *Facets of Qing Daoism*. Paris: UniversityMedia.

Goossaert, Vincent. 2007. *The Taoists of Peking, 1800-1949: A Social History of Urban Clerics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hammerstrom, Erik. 2003. "The Mysterious Gate: Daoist Monastic Liturgy in Late Imperial China." Master's thesis, University of Hawaii.

Herrou, Adeline. 2013. *A World of Their Own: Daoist Monks and Their Community in Contemporary China*. Dunedin, FL: Three Pines Press.

Komjathy, Louis. 2007. *Cultivating Perfection: Mysticism and Self-transformation in Early Quanzhen Daoism*. Leiden: Brill.

_____. 2013. *The Way of Complete Perfection: A Quanzhen Daoist Anthology*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

_____. 2017. *Taming the Wild Horse: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Daoist Horse Taming Pictures*. New York: Columbia University Press.

_____. 2023a. *Handbooks for Daoist Practice* 修道手冊. Twentieth Anniversary Edition. 3 vols. Ravinia, IL: Square Inch Press 方寸書社. (Includes translations of the Three Core Quánzhēn Scriptures)

_____. 2023b. *Dàodé jīng* 道德經*: A Contextual, Contemplative, and Annotated Bilingual Translation*. Ravinia, IL: Square Inch Press 方寸書社.

Porter, Bill. 1993. *The Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits*. San Francisco: Mercury House.

Silvers, Brock. 2005. *The Taoist Manual: An Illustrated Guide Applying Taoism to Daily Life*. Eldorado Springs, CO: Sacred Mountain Press.

Xìng Dé 興德. 2021. *The Arts of Daoism*. Translated by Johan Hausen and Allen Tsaur. Auckland, New Zealand: Purple Cloud Press.