Contents

Illustrations

Chapter One

Daoist Culture from a Christian Perspective

I have two points in mind for this dialogic exploration of Daoism and Christianity. First, I want to introduce the general characteristics of Daoism and its culture in East Asia, especially in China and Korea. Second, I want to examine Daoism from a Christian perspective, so that the close affinity of religious thoughts and eschatological vision between the two religions may become clearer and better appreciated.

Understanding Daoist Culture

What is your impression of Daoism? Generally, the image people have involves immortals (*shenxian* 神仙), nonaction (*wuwei* 無爲), and naturalness (*ziran* 自然). Immortals are popular figures throughout East Asia.

In China and Korea, there is a popular type of painting, called "Portrait of the Eight Immortals" (*Baxiantu* 八仙圖). It depicts each figure with distinctive iconographic attributes, based on the legends about them.

Fig. 1. The Eight Immortals

They include Zhongli Quan 鍾離權, a general of the Han dynasty ((206 BC-AD 6), who later became a Daoist (*daoshi* 道士); he holds a fan that resurrects the dead. The famous Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, a wandering healer and poet, carries a demon-slaying sword that relieves people from disasters. He supposedly lived in the Tang dynasty (618-907).

Li Tieguai 李鐵拐 has a crippled leg and gets around on an iron crutch; he also holds a gourd. Stories tell how he went on an ecstatic journey outside his body. When he returned, he could not find his body because his disciple had taken him for dead and cremated it. Having to find a body for himself, he adopted that of a beggar who had just died. This new body—lame, untidy, shaggy, with bulging eyes—was rather perfect for moving about unencumbered in the world, so he used an iron crutch to get around.

Fig. 2. Ironcrutch Li

Zhang Guolao 張果老, also supposedly of the Tang dynasty, is depicted as riding a white mule, which he transformed into a paper image and folded up to put in his sleeve when he wanted to walk about on foot.

Lan Caihe 藍采和, sometimes shown as male and sometimes as female, carries a basket of flowers. He would sing a song and give away money when drunk. Hearing the sound of a flute, Lan would rise into the heavens riding on a crane.

As this shows, immortals are beings that enjoy freedom and transcendence regardless of social position and gender. They are attractive to people of the 21st century since they go for what they like and represent equality. As a group, the Eight Immortals became popular in Yuan-dynasty China (1260-1368); since then, people have placed their picture on walls and prayed to them for good fortune and longevity. The cult moved into Korea soon after this time. There it was associated particularly with longevity, one among the Five Blessings (*wufu* 五福), which also include wealth, posterity, love of virtue, and peaceful death. Living a long life without diseases and obstacles is a wish all human beings harbor—and its pursuit is a key characteristic of Daoism, from where it spread throughout the Three Teachings (*sanjiao* 三教) of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

Each one of these teachings plays its own role in the various areas of Korean spiritual culture. Confucianism tends to focus on morality, required to maintain social order and manage social life. Its teachings claim that human beings are inherently moral, naturally containing virtue or inner power (*de* 德), and that the ultimate goal of life is moral completion. Confucianism thus focuses on a morally integrated society as its foremost ideal. As a result, its representatives have played a pivotal role in moral education and shaped the fundamental principles of society. They believe that the gradual proliferation of morality is the effect of the increasingly moral behavior of individuals. Once individuals behave morally, this grows into the harmonious management of every family, creating good order in local communities and realizing righteous politics in the state, thereby creating a completely moral world. Given this predilection, it is understandable that Confucianism has had a pervasive influence on human relationship and society in all East Asian societies. However, it also comes with a strong emphasis on strict courtesy and formality, which has a stifling effect on human interaction.

Buddhism and Daoism have played complementary roles to ease the social strictures of Confucianism. Buddhism is an ascetic religion; it first introduced monasticism into Korea. It places self-denial and spiritu-

al values over mundane desires, such as wealth, reputation, and domestic happiness. It also focuses strongly on the problem of suffering and death, proposing the doctrine of karma and rebirth and providing specific funerary rituals. Under its influence, many Koreans perform a major funerary ceremony on the 49th day after a person's death (*sishijiu zhai* 四十九齋); they also venerate various buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other divine helpers, depicted in statues and housed in a variety of temples and pagodas.

Daoism, in contrast, has been somewhat more marginal in Korean society than Confucianism and Buddhism. While well organized and highly influential in China, it is here more diffuse than these other teachings, lacking an organized ordination system, formal temples, and particular priesthood (*daoshi* 道士). It is thus more of a latent religion, but with a pervasive influence on the internal aspects and life styles of the Korean people. In traditional society, when a man suffered failure in social activities, he would find consolation in the Daoist classics.

Disappointed to the point of retiring from the society or having lost his status and reputation, he would find spiritual comfort in Daoism, restoring the security he felt as a child when he was at his mother's bosom and giving him new energies to go on with his life. Daoism in many ways is thus like a big, gnarled tree: apparently useless it yet provides shade and allows people to rest under it.

Fig. 3. Zhang Guolao

In addition, Daoism also offers spiritual emancipation that allows people to break away from social formality and restrictions. Ideal Daoists, such as the Eight Immortals, often drink wine, compose poems, engage in banter with friends, and generally enjoy life: this shows the Daoist ethos. The religion focuses on artistic creativity and centers on the vital energy known as *qi* 氣, the fundamental power of all life. Activating *qi*, Daoists also worship various deities, pray for good fortune, carry about sacred talismans, arrange their houses according to Fengshui, and practice exercises along the guidelines of Chinese medicine.

Daoism in Society

Daoism is a complex religion. It embraces both—personal freedom attained through high spiritual states as described in the ancient classics, *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of Dao and Its Virtue) and the *Zhuangzi* (Book of Master Zhuang); and it embraces numerous popular, even superstitious elements. It is, therefore, all-inclusive, embracing the high as much as the low levels of human spiritual activity.

Westerners today are particularly fond of it, moreover, because it echoes post-modern views. Their core idea is that, until the 20th century, there was only one pivotal axis underlying the world, both in its political and cultural dimensions. Now, there is pluralism in all respects, plus a strong belief in the need to respect individual personalities and guaranteeing the mental freedom of all. Only based on these principles can we build a new and better society. For example, there is the concept of the X generation, i.e., of people born close to the new millennium. A true generation-Xer establishes his or her self-identity clearly and strongly, knowing exactly who s/he is so that s/he can stand on his or her own feet without bothering about anyone else's opinions. Post-modernism, although it did away with the central, pivotal axis of a unified teaching that influenced traditional culture, cannot provide a clear-cut, valid direction where we have to go—secular individualism alone will not suffice.

While the openness and variety of Daoist teachings and practices closely echoes this, unlike post-modernism, they provide distinctive points of focus for intention and direction. Already Laozi describes Dao as the ultimate principle underlying all existence, the origin of the myri-

ad beings. Dao brings all things into being, raises, and nurtures them. Benevolent (*ren* 仁) and caring (*ci* 慈), Dao is like an affectionate mother the maternal affection. As the *Daode jing* says,

> The whole world says Dao is great and unlike anything else.
> Because it is great, it is unlike anything else.
> If it were like other things, it would have been small long ago.
>
> I have three treasures to keep and treasure;
> First caring, second thriftiness,
> Third is not daring to be ahead of the world.
>
> Caring, you can be brave.
> Thrifty, you can be generous.
> Not presuming, you can be master of all vessels.
>
> Now, not caring yet wanting to be brave,
> Not thrifty yet wanting to be generous,
> Not staying behind yet wanting to be in front—this is death!
>
> Caring—attack with it and win; defend with it and hold firm.
> Heaven saves and protects through caring alone. (ch. 67)

Thus, it is due to the greatness of Dao that people in the world, in "all under Heaven," claim Dao is too big to be compared to other things. If Dao is similar to things in any way, it will get small and impermanent just like them, and lose its original character. Laozi illustrates the features of Dao with three treasures (*sanbao* 三寶): caring, thriftiness (*jian* 儉), and "not daring to be ahead of the world" (*bugan wei tianxia xian* 不敢爲天下先). The latter is a way of expressing nonaction, the way Dao nurtures the myriad beings without domination or contention, just by letting them transform naturally.

We can be courageous because we are caring; we can be generous because we are thrifty. This applies both to material and mental aspects: we can have mercy on other people because we are conservative with ourselves. As long as we are full of self-interest, there is no way we can afford to consider others. The more we empty ourselves, the more we get along with others, care for them, and become generous and merciful.

Never daring to be ahead of anybody else, we can be true rulers of ourselves and in the world.

The same holds true for a group or a community, as well as the world of politics: compulsion inevitably creates repugnance, but no one will ever hate a ruler who allows people to realize themselves. According to Laozi, if such a person becomes ruler, people will not feel oppressed and do not suffer under the weight of their chief; they are at ease with authority. He, therefore, insists that such a person is capable of being a true ruler.

On the other hand, it is death to try to be brave, generous, or in the lead without solidly embodying the qualities of the three treasures. They are the means by which we will triumph and become invulnerable. Thus, Heaven comes to save and protect us. "Heaven" (*tian* 天) was a way of referring to the highest god in ancient China, an anthropomorphized personal aspect of universal power. Dao, in contrast, is the more abstract, metaphysical dimension of the same idea. Both connect to humanity and offer support and protection as long as we hold on to the three treasures.

Proto-Daoist Hermits

The first traces of proto-Daoist hermits appear around the lifetime of Laozi, i.e., 500 BC. The *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects) of Confucius (551-479 BC), the founder of Confucianism, is a reliable historical source providing information. It contains several scenes showing Confucius and his disciples confronting hermits during their travels from state to state in search of political influence. Hermits at the time were men who removed themselves from a luxuriant, excessive society, embracing a simple life without words. To withdraw meant resist secular society.

The *Lunyu* has three episodes where Confucius meets hermits. For example, he once acted on behalf of the minister of justice in his native state of Lu and thus traveled by carriage, which signaled high social status. A man by the name of Jieyu 接輿 from the southern state of Chu 楚 came by his house and sang:

> Phoenix, oh phoenix!
> How thy virtue has declined!

> What is past is beyond help,
> What is to come is not yet lost.
> Give up, give up!
> Perilous is the lot of those in office today. (18.5)

The phoenix, with its brightly shining variegated colors, is a symbol of the pure times of peace and tranquility. Here it is used to satirize Confucius who tried to contribute to a peaceful world but acted recklessly. The hermit says that Confucius' virtue had declined and that any engagement in political activities was perilous: he would gain nothing for all his efforts.

Hearing this song, Confucius got down from the carriage with the intention of talking to him, but he ran away, pretending to be a lunatic. The story shows Confucius' respect for Jieyu as well as his awareness that even hermits sincerely criticized the corruption of the secular world and devoted their lives to its improvement.

Fig. 4. Confucius

According to another tale, Changju 長沮 and Jieni 桀溺 were plowing a field, when Confucius passed by. He sent his disciple Zilu 子路 to ask them for the location of the nearest river ford. The men said,

> Muddy water overflows the entire world. Who are you to change this state of affairs? Better follow the model of those who simply withdraw from this world. Moreover, for your own sake, would it not be better if you followed one who leaves the world altogether rather than running after this man who keeps on wandering through the world in hopes of reform? (18.6).

Zilu immediately realized that these two were not ordinary farmers. He went back and reported their words to Confucius. The Master was lost in

thought for a while, then said, "One cannot associate with birds and beasts. So, if I do not associate with people, who can I associate with? If Dao prevailed in the world, I would not try to change anything."

Both Confucius and the two recluses, Changju and Jieni, shared the critical awareness that their world lacked Dao but they had different solutions. Hermits voice their criticism of society by withdrawing from the secular world and maintaining their personal purity. Confucius, in contrast, endeavored to reform the world while remaining active in it—through political influence or, failing that, by educating and shaping men of superior moral capability.

Another, third story features Zilu. Having fallen behind on the road, he encountered an old man carrying a basket on a staff over his shoulder. He asked, "Have you seen my master?" The old man said, "Your four limbs have not toiled and you cannot distinguish the five grains—who may your master be?" His words point to the limitations of Confucian scholars, who were mainly literary men, devoted to studying. He may possibly be a member of the School of the Tillers or Agriculturalists (Nongjia 農家). Zilu just stood there with his arms folded, not responding. The old man, however, turned out to be hospitable and invited him to stay the night. He killed a chicken and cooked some millet (18.7). The tale shows that Confucians and hermits respected each other despite their differences in outlook.

Similar episodes appear in also in the *Mengzi* 孟子 (Book of Mencius; 372-289 BC). In this time, about a hundred years after the death of Confucius, the School of Tillers insisted that all people should provide for themselves by farming equally, regardless their social status, including even king and senior officials. Mencius disagreed with this and insisted on the efficiency of specialization.

In another line, he also mentions a figure called Yang Zhu 楊朱, noting that he would not do anything that might harm his body and life: he would not pull out a single hair, even if he could save the whole world by doing so. Mencius criticizes this stance as highly egotistical, but he does not quite appreciate the full significance of this view, which is commonly called hedonist. Yang Zhu focused on "keeping inner nature whole and preserving life" (*quanxing baozhen* 全性保眞), proposing ways to "nourish life" (*yangsheng* 養生). What he means by this is that "we must never throw our life away or abandon sincerity in favor of worldly

reputation or material wealth." Another type of hermit, he is a strong forerunner of later Daoists, whose thinking is best represented in the *Daode jing* and the *Zhuangzi*.

Laozi

Fig. 5. Laozi on His Ox

Laozi 老子 is the name of a semi-historical figure as well as of a book. According to the *Shiji* 史記 (Record of the Historian, ch. 63), compiled by Sima Qian 司馬遷 around 100 BC, he was a native of Chu. His personal name was Er 耳; his family name, Li 李—later also the name of the ruling house of the Tang dynasty who claimed descent from Laozi and held Daoism in high esteem. His personal name Er means "ear," and since long-lived persons supposedly have long ears, he often appears with long ears. In addition, the feature connects to the Daoist predilection for longevity.

According to the *Shiji*, Laozi was a historiographer at the Zhou court. This means, he was most likely literate and probably somewhat of an intellectual. The story goes that he was particularly knowledgeable about ritual and Confucius heard of him. Taking the trouble to travel to Zhou, he met Laozi and asked him how best to improve the world. Laozi told him he was too ambitious and had better give up his covetousness. This story is apocryphal: it may well show Confucius' sincerity in his efforts at learning as well as the high wisdom of the Daoist sage.

During the Han, it became part of the official state doctrine. Sima Qian as well as his father Sima Tan 司馬談, historiographers (*taishi ling* 太史令) at the Han court, respected Daoism and were steeped in the

thought of Huang-Lao 黃老, a combination of teachings traced back to the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝) and Laozi.

Laozi's fate, too, is rather legendary. According to the *Shiji*, Laozi realized that Dao was fast disappeared in his world and decided to leave his country, choosing seclusion from the secular world and riding into emigration on his ox. As he reached the western frontier, the border guard Yin Xi 尹喜 held him back: "We shall see no more of you; we will not able to listen to your teaching. Please write down your thoughts for us." Laozi complied and dictated his main thoughts, which Yin Xi compiled into a work of about 5,000 words. This is the book called *Laozi*, later renamed, and more commonly known as, *Daode jing*.

The transmitted text divides into two parts (*pian* 篇) and 81 chapters (*zhang* 章). Part one, comprising chapters 1-37, has come to be known as the *Daojing* 道經, while chapters 38-81 make up the *Dejing* 德經. The text is poetic in style, and three quarters of the chapters are rhymed; in contents, it shows profound insight into human beings and the nature of the world. Scholars, such as Bernard Karlgren, Burton Watson, and William Baxter, who have studied its literary style, conclude that the standard version was completed in the 3rd-to-4th centuries BC, while its alleged author Laozi supposedly lived in the sixth so that the text contains his transmitted teachings.

The text also is extant in several manuscripts. The oldest version of the standard edition appears first in two silk manuscripts, discovered in 1973 in a tomb at Mawangdui 馬王堆 near Changsha 長沙 in Hunan. They date to before 168 BC. In late 1993, another tomb was excavated in Guodian 廓店 near the city of Jingmen in Hubei. It yielded 804 inscribed bamboo strips in three distinct groups, some of which match the *Daode jing*. Known as the "Bamboo Laozi," this dates from before 300 BC. The manuscripts allow a much better knowledge of possible the text's formation and thus the early history of Daoist thought.