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Introduction

Scholars have long debated when and how Daoism originated. Those who see the religion more strongly in communal and ritual terms have tended to place the starting point in the Later Han dynasty, with the arising of various millenarian movements. Their key focus has been organization of the Celestial Masters (Tianshi 天師) under the leadership of Zhang Daoling 張道陵, who allegedly received the founding revelation from Lord Lao on Mount Heming in Sichuan in 142 CE.[1]

Those who understand Daoism to focus on philosophy and personal cultivation have typically placed its origin in the Warring States period (479-221—all dates in this book, unless marked "CE" are BCE), linking it to early thinkers such as Laozi, Zhuangzi, Liezi, Yang Zhu, and the like. Appreciating that philosophers at the time held a strong interest in social application and were also practitioners of self-cultivation techniques, they see the beginning of the religion in small groups of like-minded seekers who later evolved into more complex ritual and communal structures.[2]

Early Dynasties

Looking further back in history, however, the picture changes. Even before the Warring States, under the Shang (ca. 1550-1046) and Western Zhou (1046-771) dynasties, Chinese society had already established patterns that continued to pervade Daoist beliefs and practices, embedding the religion deeply in the culture. Most notable among them are worship of nature deities, a hierarchical understanding of the otherworld, extensive ancestral sacrifices, and widespread use of divination in various modes.

That is to say, populated by nature deities such as sun, moon, rain, and thunder as well as a plethora of ancestors—most importantly those of the ruling house and its original founder, known as the High God or Thearch (*shangdi* 上帝)—the otherworld in early China had a major impact on all events and occurrences on earth.[3] Ancestors not only served as intermediaries to the great nature deities but also influenced social and personal events by bestowing either blessings or curses on human actions.

As a result, all activities involving the ruler, from the most mundane to the most decisive, had to be submitted to the ancestors' inspection and were

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[1] See Hendrischke 2000; Kleeman 1998; Strickmann 1980.

[2] See Kirkland 2004; Puett 2002; Roth 1999.

[3] Allan 1991; Chang 1983; Keightley 2000.

either supported or rejected. All events likely to occur were posted to the ancestors for their prediction and guidance. Different ancestors, moreover, held different ranks and were responsible for different areas of life, giving rise to an extensive otherworldly bureaucracy.[4] They received regular offerings based on a complex ritual schedule that followed the so-called sexagenary cycle, a calendar consisting of a ten-day week and twelve-year system (Keightley 2000, 37-43).

Divination, unlike fortune-telling from palms, playing cards, or dreams, is the reading of divine guidance through natural or external signs. Shang rulers employed the so-called oracle bones, carapaces of turtles and shoulder blades of cattle that had holes drilled into them and were heated over a fire. Professional diviners, possibly of shamanic background, would then interpret the resulting cracks to mean either yes or no. Questions asked could be both simple and more complex, including particular weather patterns on given days, the outcome of warfare, the birth of son or daughter, the relief for the king's toothache, and more (Chang 1980; Keightley 1978a; 2000).

Daoists incorporated a heavy dose of Shang religion into their beliefs and practices. The Daoist otherworld is hierarchically organized and populated by nature deities and ancestors, joined in due course by pure divine emanations of Dao and lofty spirit immortals. Regular rituals to these various deities are essential to maintain harmony in the cosmos. The gods have to be appeased to prevent disasters, but they can also be enticed to give guidance to human beings. Communication with them is a bureaucratic act that involves the written language, no longer in the form of oracle-bone cracks but through petitions, contracts, mandates, and other documents. Daoist priests are intermediaries of the divine realm and occupy official positions in the otherworld; equipped with special passports and sacred passwords, they can—like shamans—travel into the spheres beyond (Benn 2000; Bumbacher 2012).

Another early feature of Chinese culture that exerted a strong impact on Daoism is the notion of Heaven (*tian* 天), the central deity of the Zhou and ultimate arbiter of nature gods and ancestors. Unlike the High God of the Shang, this was not a former human being and thus not guided by personal whims and moods. Rather, Heaven was a process, an abstract representation of the cycles and patterns of nature, a nonhuman force that interacted closely with the human world in an impersonal way.

Reacting to good rule and upright social behavior, it would show its pleasure by creating harmony through appropriate weather patterns, fertility, and general wellness. Should the ruler be dissolute or society in discord, however, it would reveal its displeasure by sending along floods, droughts, earthquakes, locust plagues, epidemics, and the like. Heaven thus represented the sum-total of human and natural activities, matching their impulses with appropriate responses (Eno 1990).

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[4] Keightley 2000, 101; Shahar and Weller 1996.

The concept that humanity and nature or Heaven exist in a close, if not immediate, relationship has remained central to Chinese thinking, and even in 1976 it was clear to all Chinese that the massive earthquake in August was a harbinger of the death of Chairman Mao in September—both equally signifying upheaval and major change. The understanding has thoroughly pervaded Daoism, and the entire complex of Daoist ethics revolves around it (Kohn 2004a).

Divination

A yet different early feature of early Chinese culture that has shaped Daoism is the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), a divination manual that, rather than providing yes/no answers as the oracle bones did, helps people determine the tendencies inherent in the course of Heaven and aids them in making good decisions through formal judgments and advice. Allegedly compiled into a coherent book by Confucius around 500, its system claims to go back to prehistory when a mythical ruler named Fu Xi 伏羲 discerned its original symbols from constellations in the stars. King Wen, the mastermind behind the Zhou conquest, supposedly first standardized its basic judgments (Wilhelm 1950).

The *Yijing* utilizes the two cosmic forces yin and yang as symbolized by an unbroken and a broken line, then combined in sets of two and three to form four symbols (*sixiang* 四象) and eight trigrams (*bagua* 八卦). The latter are further joined into a set of sixty-four hexagrams that form the bulk of the work. Each hexagram comes with an explanation of its image, a judgment, an explanation of the judgment, and a fortune for each individual line.

All these provide advice, often couched in rather ambiguous and vague terms yet closely reflecting the concrete reality of Zhou-dynasty life, where family relations were important, travel and communication were hard, the key relationship was with the lord or great man, and inner sincerity was valued highly. It is accessible today through commentaries, both traditional and modern, and often has to be read with a good dose of intuition and personal feeling (Smith 1991).

Daoists as much as other Chinese literati have used the *Yijing* for millennia to give guidance and to support them in their decision-making. More specifically Daoists have used the hexagrams in alchemy to symbolize the waxing and waning of yin and yang through the seasons, placing them in a series of twelve hexagrams:

This sequence shows the rising of yang between the winter and summer solstices—the latter located in the center of the line and symbolized by the six-yang hexagram "Heaven"—followed by the rising of yin as the year once again moves toward winter. It allows a subtle, pictorial description of seasonal

change, pinpointing optimal times for the concoction of an elixir or the growth of the immortal embryo. Besides applying the *Yijing* in its originally intended mode as a divination manual, Daoists have thus also employed its symbols to express subtle cosmological and internal transformations.

Taking all this together, the entire complex of Daoist interaction with the otherworld—its deities, administration, functioning, as well as the major ways of discerning its patterns and communicating with it—has deep roots in early China, going back far beyond the ancient thinkers and even farther beyond the first communities of the religion. Seen from this perspective, the Daoist movements of the Later Han that eventually gave rise to the full-fledged organized religion appear as a historically and sociologically specific manifestation of a pervasive Chinese way of dealing with life in and beyond this world. The philosophical exploits of Warring States thinkers and the proto-Daoist self-cultivation and alternative social communities that reflected their ideas, moreover, in this light appear as particular superstructures that punctuate and modulate, but never fundamentally change, the overall flow of dominant religious attitudes and behaviors.

The Golden Age

What is more, Daoists are quite aware of this fact. They—both thinkers and priests—as much as all Chinese philosophers, are backward looking, postulating a golden age in the murky past when Dao was whole, the world was in harmony, and life was good. While scholars have been well aware of this tendency, the overall assumption has been that this golden age was entirely fictional, a figment of the collective imagination, a well-intentioned fantasy. But what if it is more than that?

The texts are fairly specific, after all. Confucians speak clearly about the ideal sage kings Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and Yu 禹. While all three were thought to be mythical paragons, recent archaeological excavation suggests differently. There is some speculation today that the Xia dynasty, allegedly founded by Yu, was in fact a historical force with one of its capitals, Wenyi 文邑, located at Erlitou 二里頭in Henan (Liu and Chen 2012, 253). There is evidence for several great floods that the Erlitou state controlled as part of its rise to local dominance (2012, 251). Prior to that, as some scholars suggest, glyphs written in red on a pottery vessel found at Taosi 陶寺in the Linfen Basin 臨汾盆of the Yellow River, indicate the name of Yao. This would identify him as the ruler of this important economic, political, and religious center, a hub of early urbanism, with Shun as his chosen, nonhereditary successor (Liu and Chen 2012, 226).

Taosi dates to 2600-2000, while Erlitou flourished right afterwards, 1900-1500, overlapping with the rising Shang by about a century (Chang 2005, 126). The time saw the transition from copper to bronze technology as well as the consolidation of about 10,000 to 3,000 local centers through increasingly insti-

tutionalized warfare and the accumulation of wealth and amassing of power in the hands of smaller elites (2005, 127).

In other words, the golden age later Confucian thinkers look back to is the Chalcolithic, the Copper Age, when technology was advanced enough to work with metal, but had not yet developed the mining and smelting of tin—nor yet the social organization and political clout—needed for the production of bronze (McIntosh 2006, 55). The earliest bronzes appear in very late Taosi and, more extensively, in Erlitou, indicating a more stratified and controlled society, where personal relationships were secondary to institutional governance and moral integrity gave way to power mongering—the exact trends Confucian thinkers bemoan and want to reverse.

Daoists, on the other hand, do not share this vision. Their ideal is "a small country with few people" (*Daode jing* 80), where folk live in contained, settled communities with dogs and chickens, grow their own food, weave their own cloth, make their own pots, and generally are self-sufficient and contented. This reflects Chinese reality at an earlier period, i.e., in the early Neolithic or Mesolithic, around 9000-5000, during the Mid-Holocene climatic optimum, when the weather had turned warm and wet (Liu and Chen 2012, 123).

People in the Chinese heartland at the time, while maintaining many aspects of the Paleolithic lifestyle, were no longer itinerant but lived in year-round settlements, as evidenced by remnants of dwellings, storage pits, and burials. They were practicing some elementary plant cultivation in conjunction with hunting and gathering, as testified in the remains of various food animals—both wild and domesticated— as well as of large numbers of vermin, plant parts, functionally specific vessels, and secondary refuse (2012, 125). Villages were about 5-20 acres in size and housed around a hundred people. They were not close, but surrounded by uncultivated land—only two acres being occupied in every 30 square miles (Shelach-Levi 2015, 70-71).

In other words, early Daoist thinkers, saw the Mesolithic as their golden age, a time when agricultural cultivation began and communities were settled, but still matched Paleolithic and hunter-gatherer patterns by living in small, egalitarian communities, their life closely following the cycles of nature. This is most blatant in their primitivist strand, which adopted the Divine Farmer (Shennong 神農) as its mythical hero, the sage ruler who allegedly first developed agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving, and pharmacology.[5] After him, this group was called the Agriculturists or School of Tillers (*nongjia* 農家). Around 315, under the leadership of Chen Xiang 陳相, they established a withdrawn utopian community in the state of Teng, which consisted largely of farmers and craftsmen (Graham 1990a, 68-69, 101; Vervoorn 1990, 60).

Their ideal was to achieve alignment with Dao by living in small, self-administered communities free from social stratification and outside pressures.

[5]Graham 1990a, 81; Campany 2005, 99; Lee 2014, ch. 4.

Sedentary, they would rest contented with enough food, clothing, and shelter and have no desire for migration, expansion, or outside contacts (Lee 2007, 600-01). They believed that the "inner nature" (*xing* 性) or inherent tendencies of everything, including people, animals, and natural objects, formed a set ontological reality that needed to be uncovered and preserved but not cultivated or transformed, and certainly not altered or manipulated by instruments or techniques (Lee 2007, 602-03, 608; Brindley 2010, 80-81).

Reclaiming Simplicity

They—as much as many later Daoists—accordingly rejected the hallmarks of civilization, such as boats, carriages, and armor (Sarkassian 2010, 314), as well as all forms of expert craftsmanship. "If we must use curve and plumb line, compass and square to make something right," the primitivists note, "that means cutting away its inner nature; if we must use cords and knots, glue and lacquer to make something firm, this means violating its natural potency" (*Zhuangzi* 8; Watson 1968, 100). Claiming that "works of art derange the senses and generate unnatural desires" and that "any advance in sophistication and laws only creates more trouble" (Sarkassian 2010, 316-17), they pursued the ideal of the "uncarved block" (*pu* 朴) (Lee 2007, 601). This also involved a rejection of knowledge and critical awareness, achieved in the legendary age of He Xu 赫胥: "People stayed home but did not know what they were doing, walked around but did not know where they were going. Their mouths crammed with food, they were merry; drumming their bellies, they had a good time" (*Zhuangzi* 9; Watson 1968, 106; Sarkassian 2010, 220).

Believing that "we once lived in better balance not because we had better desires or better leadership but because we lacked the means to let our desires run amok and cause strife" (Sarkassian 2010, 322), the primitivists proposed a radical program of purging the world. They strove to obliterate all artifice and silence all those who promoted it, in other words, returning as closely as possible to Mesolithic conditions, recovering a time that was long gone but remained hidden and submerged in their subconscious memory.

Going even beyond this, Daoist recluses and immortality seekers pursued a time when human beings were not settled and did not practice agriculture, but lived off the land and were even more closely connected to nature. Unlike Confucian hermits who left society because they put personal integrity, health, and peace of mind before the demands of politics and society, Daoists pursued total independence, a state beyond harm, the freedom to wander wherever they pleased, easily and joyfully (Vervoorn 1984, 280; Berkowitz 1989, 101-03).

Leaving all civilization behind, they moved into the mountains, where wild animals and indigenous tribes roamed, seeking to follow simpler, even animal ways of life (Goh 2011, 118). Immortals, called *xian* 仙, a graph that shows a man next to a mountain, were closely associated with the untamed and

threatening parts of the natural world. Living alone or in very small groups, always on the move in full alignment with the natural cycles and partaking of its most potent parts, they attained extended old age and strong vigor as well as all sorts of healing and exorcistic powers.

Seen from the perspective of prehistory, these Daoists reclaimed a time before settled communities and agriculture, when humans lived in small groups, roaming the land, hunting and gathering, and enjoying their lives—the Paleolithic. As both archaeological evidence of temporary settlements and anthropological fieldwork among modern hunter-gatherers document, the itinerant life was one of "pristine affluence" (Sahlins 1972, 29). Secure in a deep "trust in the abundance of nature's resources," people had few needs and minimal possessions, with lots of space to gather and hunt and play. There was plenty of food to go around, so that their workdays were short and interspersed with breaks and fun. They were tall, healthy, and long-lived, enjoying their small communities, yet also meeting with other bands at regular intervals to exchange news, goods, and marriage partners (Mithen 2004, 43; Christian 2008, 101).

Life was sweet—and there is every reason to be suspicious of civilization with its social organization, power structure, and repressive administration. Early Daoist recluses, therefore—and monastics and self-cultivation practitioners in their wake—chose to recover a golden age of the even more distant past, besting their community-centered fellows by another 5000 or so years. However, both have in common that they do not pursue an empty illusion but seek something humanity did in fact have at some time in history, working to recover a state that is rightfully ours. The roots of Daoism, in other words, go far beyond the Celestial Masters and the *Daode jing*, into the Stone Age, the early stages of humanity on earth.