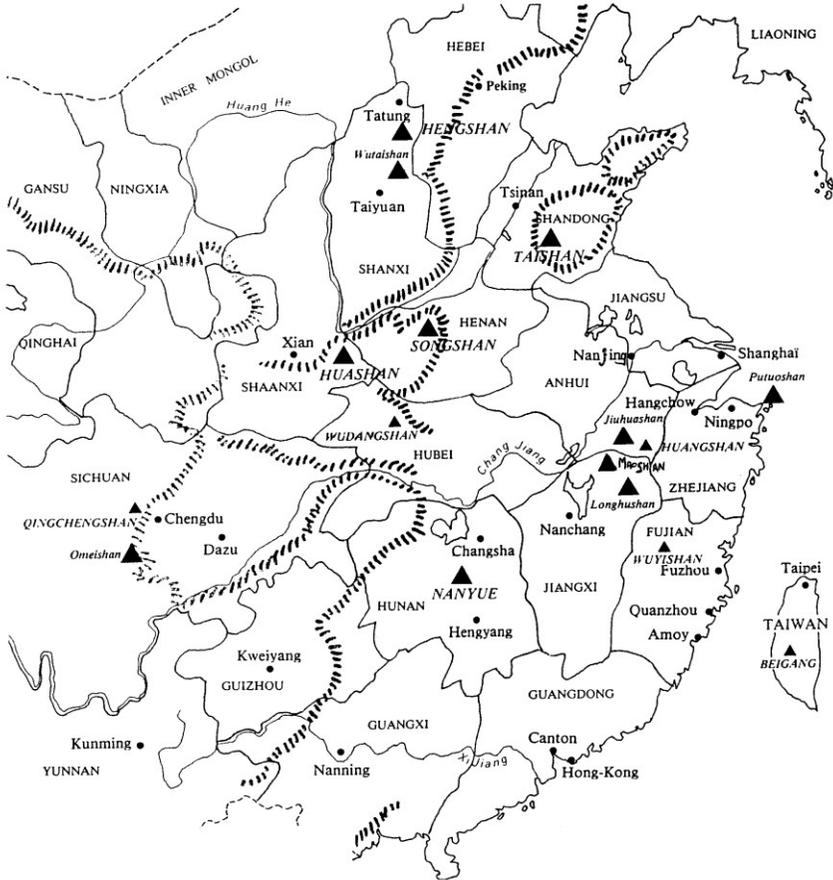


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Map of China



Introduction

Daoism is the indigenous organized religion of traditional China. It is best known in the West as “Taoism” – using an older mode of transliterating Chinese – and as such for its philosophy and health practices. Its philosophy is mainly associated with the notion of “Dao” or “Way,” and involves ideas of naturalness and ease, nonaction and going along with the flow. Its health practices are seen in the context of taiji quan and qigong, and involve techniques of deep breathing, slow motion, and gentle stretches. While both philosophy and health practices form an intricate part of Daoism and play an important role in the religion, they are only partial aspects of a larger picture, which also includes a social and political vision, elaborate rituals and priestly hierarchies, protective talismans and exorcistic spells, as well as advanced spiritual meditations and ecstatic soul travels to the stars.

This multifaceted, complex nature of Daoism has only been recognized recently. Nineteenth-century missionaries, the first Westerners to come in contact with materials considered Daoist, did not see Daoism in this light at all. Rather, when confronted with the ancient texts associated with Laozi and Zhuangzi that expressed the philosophy of Dao, they could not reconcile their being part of the same tradition as religious practitioners performing rituals and self-cultivation exercises.

Instead, they were fascinated by the texts and disgusted by the practices. The philosophical works they found subtle and of a high inspirational value. Latinizing the names of Chinese thinkers (Kongfuzi into Confucius, Mengzi into Mencius), they created Laocius out of Laozi and integrated his ideas into a Western frame of thought. “Dao” became another expression for God, and the teachings of nonaction and going along with the flow were understood as a way to achieve mystical union. A notion of transcendence was attached to Dao, and a Christian sense of meekness and turning the other cheek was seen in descriptions of its weakness and softness.

The works of the ancient Daoist “thinkers” were thus rendered acceptable to a Christian perspective and treated with reverence and politeness. Not so the religious practices. Any ritual or cultivation activities, associ-

ated with organized communities or lineages, were considered nonsensical and superstitious, a danger to the Christian mission that had to be extirpated or at least ignored.

This initial interaction pattern of Westerners with Daoist materials is responsible for the problematic distinction of “philosophical” and “religious” Daoism, and the one-sided positive evaluation of the former and rigid condemnation of the latter. It is clear today that the ancient Daoist texts have very little in common with Christian values and are not “philosophy” in our sense at all. Rather, the ancient “thinkers” represent the first instance of a literati tradition of Daoist thought which continued throughout Chinese history. Also, even they, it seems, undertook spiritual exercises transmitted from master to disciple, thus setting a first model for later self-cultivation groups. Then again, looking at the tradition from the perspective of practice, many ritual and longevity techniques of later centuries were also highly sophisticated and made important contributions to Daoist thought and Chinese culture.

A more subtle understanding of Daoism in its full complexity began with the reprint of the Daoist canon (*Daozang*) in Shanghai in 1923-25. The canon is a collection of about 1,500 texts which contains scriptures, commentaries, hagiographies, cultivation manuals, and liturgies. Completed in 1445, it was the result of an intense compilation effort over several decades and continued earlier compilations of Daoist materials that went back as far as the fifth century C.E., but had been lost, burned, or otherwise destroyed. Even this canon was hidden away in the depth of monasteries and almost forgotten, so that in the early twentieth century, only two sets of woodblocks survived.

The blocks were collated and reprinted in Shanghai, and the canon became accessible outside of Daoist institutions for the first time. It was then picked up by local scholars as well as by academics from France and Japan, whose governments had colonial interests in East Asia. To facilitate their political ambitions, the French and Japanese encouraged their scholars to collect information on Chinese indigenous beliefs and practices and made the acquisition of texts easy. As a result, most academic studies of Daoism beyond the ancient texts were first created in China, France, and Japan, whose learned scholars produced many seminal works in the field.

A wider spread of the study of Daoism occurred in the 1960s, after the Daoist canon was reprinted in Taiwan in a reduced, sixty-volume edition. Both affordable and transportable for the first time, it made its way

not only into more libraries but also into the homes of many academics and interested students. A new generation of scholars arose who opened many new venues and aspects of the religion, and whose students are the leading scholars of today – not only in China, Japan, and France, but in many different countries all over the world. Through their work, Daoism for the first time is now being seen in a wider comparative context and evaluated in the light of abstract religious phenomena, such as shamanism, mysticism, monasticism, ritual, and meditation. Also, for the first time today a set of comprehensive and powerful reference works has been created, that standardizes terminology and classifications and makes the religion accessible to all.

As revealed by sources in the canon and uncovered by international scholars, the Daoist religion is highly complex. It has a long history that began with the works of Laozi and Zhuangzi around 400 B.C.E., underwent several stages of organization and development, is still evolving in China today, and has, most recently, begun to make inroads in the West. Throughout its development, it has always been closely linked with Chinese history and culture, and many of its features cannot be understood unless seen in a larger context.

For example, the thought of naturalness and nonaction of the early thinkers is but one reaction to the social and political instability China underwent at the beginning of the iron age; the integrated vision of the various Daoist teachings in the sixth century was predicated by the political urge for unification at the time; and the importance of oracles and direct communication with Daoist gods today can be directly linked to the popular rise of spirit-writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Embedded in Chinese history and culture, Daoism also grew under the strong influence of Buddhism, from which it adopted aspects of worldview, such as ideas of karma, rebirth, and hell; ethics, including precepts and monastic vows; and philosophical speculation, such as notions of emptiness and the logic of enlightened states. Daoism also fruitfully interacted with popular religion, from which it integrated numerous ritual and protective practices as well as local and martial deities.

Despite all these connections and influences, Daoism is a highly unique religious tradition with characteristics and practices clearly distinct from those of Buddhism, Confucianism, and popular religion. It has its own specific cosmology centered on Dao as the underlying power and constituting pattern of the universe. Dao may be described as unfathomable and ineffable or represented by celestial powers, but it is always seen as

lying at the root of creation yet manifest in all that exists on the mundane and visible plane. Dao is subtle and soft and essentially benevolent. Mediated through *qi* or cosmic, vital energy – also a key concept in Chinese medicine and general cosmology – Dao is essential and accessible to human beings in their everyday life. Aligning oneself with Dao, creating harmony and a sense of participation in it, will bring out the best in people and create a state of overall goodness and wellbeing – in cosmos, nature, society, and the human body. Unlike in Confucianism, this state of goodness is not primarily achieved through a moral effort; unlike in Buddhism, worldly harmony is not ultimately unsatisfactory because it is impermanent and conditioned by the senses; unlike in popular religion, it does not depend on ghosts, gods, and ancestors to be found. The terminology of all these cultural strands is similar and the differences to Daoism are often subtle, but there is a definite distinction to be made.

The same can be said about transmission patterns and the practices of self-cultivation and ritual. Daoist transmission always involves some form of direct contact with Dao as the underlying power of the cosmos. It can be achieved through semi-mystical intuition that is sometimes mediated by a scripture, through a trance-like vision of a Daoist god or immortal, or through the offices of an ordination master and the oral transmission of lineage secrets. Daoist self-cultivation, although it applies practices also found in Chinese medicine and the longevity tradition, is distinct from the latter because its first and foremost aim is not the attainment of good health, more money, and a better sex-life (nothing wrong with those, either), but a greater sense of belonging to Dao, of interacting with the underlying force of the larger universe, a transformation of self and body into a more cosmic, Dao-focused entity.

Ritual, moreover, in Daoism is distinct because it takes the form of an audience with the celestial forces and representatives of the Dao. The Daoist priest becomes a celestial officer with all the rights and powers this entails. His empowerment and interaction with the gods, moreover, take place through written documents, making ritual essentially a bureaucratic act and therefore binding for both parties. This is different from Confucian and popular rites, which are essentially sacrifices, offerings of food and prayers to the forces of nature and the ancestors. Confucian and popular ritualists remain human throughout, and the interaction with the gods is oral. While food and drink offerings afford a certain leverage to engage the deities in reciprocally supportive actions, the sacrifices are not as binding as the bureaucratic Daoist petitions and celestial orders. The again, Daoist ritual is also different from its Buddhist

counterpart, which is an adaptation of Indian *puja* and therefore consists essentially of the formalities of a host receiving an honored guest. This, too, lacks the typical Daoist features of celestial empowerment and written communication with the divine.

In all these respects, therefore, Daoism has clear characteristics that delimitate it effectively from the other traditions of China and the various features of Chinese culture. Within the Daoist tradition, then, one can distinguish three types of organization and practice: literati, communal, and self-cultivation.

Literati Daoists are members of the educated elite who focus on Daoist ideas as expressed by the ancient thinkers, commonly known as *daojia* or “Daoist school” after an early bibliographical classification. They use these concepts to create meaning in their world and hope to exert some influence on the political and social situation of their time, contributing to greater universal harmony, known as the state of Great Peace (*taiping*). The lineage and legitimation of such literati Daoists comes from the devotion and dedication to the classical texts, which they interpret in commentaries and essays, and whose metaphors they employ in stories and poetry. They may live a life of leisure or be active in society as local officials, poets and writers, or teachers at academies, but in all cases their self-identity derives from ideas centered on Dao. Literati Daoists have been part of the tradition since its inception, and the ancient thinkers Laozi and Zhuangzi may well be considered their first example. But they also appear among commentators to the texts, patriarchs of religious schools, thinkers of Confucian or Buddhist background, and academics today.

Communal Daoists, too, are found in many different positions and come from all levels of society. They are members of organized Daoist groups that follow *daojiao* or the “Daoist teaching.” They have priestly hierarchies, formal initiations, regular rituals, and prayers to the gods. Some communal Daoists organizations are tightly controlled fraternities with secret rites and limited contact to the outside world. Others are part of ordinary society, centered on neighborhood temples and concerned with the affairs of ordinary life – weddings and funerals, protection and exorcism. Their expression tends to be in liturgies, prayer hymns, and moral rules. Historically, they have been documented from the second century C.E. onward and shown a high degree of continuity over the millennia. While specific rites and organizational patterns changed, there is a distinct line from the early millenarian movements to the Celestial Masters

today, and one can see a clear link between the ritual of medieval China and contemporary liturgies, both lay and monastic.

The third group of Daoists focuses on self-cultivation and is known as practitioners of *yangsheng* or “nurturing life.” They, too, come from all walks of life, but rather than communal rites, their main concern is the attainment of personal health, longevity, peace of mind, and spiritual immortality—either in mystical oneness with Dao or through visions of and interaction with the gods. They tend to pay little attention to political involvement, and their organization depends strongly on the master-disciple relationship. Their groups can be small and esoteric, with only a few active followers (as certain taiji quan lineages), large and extensive with leanings toward organized religion (as the contemporary Falun dafa), or vague and diffuse with numerous people practicing a variety of different techniques (as in modern qigong). Again, historical continuity is strong. The earliest examples of self-cultivation groups are found before the Common Era, tentatively among the followers of Laozi and Zhuangzi and quite evidently among the magical-practitioners and their lineages. These groups, moreover, gave rise to religious schools, beginning with a few dedicated immortality seekers and growing into leading Daoist organizations.

Interconnected from the beginning, these three types of Daoism—literati, communal, and self-cultivation—although distinct in their abstract description, are not mutually exclusive in practice. On the contrary, as contemporary practitioners often emphasize, to be a complete Daoist one must follow all three paths: studying worldview and being socially responsible, performing rituals and praying to the gods, and undertaking self-cultivation for health and spiritual advancement.

Historically, too, the tendency was to integrate all forms, so that certain literati Daoists were also ordained priest and masters of meditation, followers of organized groups studied the classics and engaged in healing exercises, and self-cultivation practitioners wrote poetry and prayed to the gods. But there is no norm, and one cannot categorically state that *only* those people are Daoists who exhibit the clear presence of *all* three kinds of religious activity. Even someone dedicated to only one aspect, a marginal or informal member of the religion, might still consider himself a Daoist and may well have an important contribution to make. To do justice to the Daoist tradition, we must therefore examine its different aspects on all the different levels and under careful consideration of their historical and cultural contexts.

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