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Introduction

Daoism is the indigenous higher religion of traditional China. Growing from a philosophical root and developing through practices of longevity and immortality, it has found expression in communal organizations, ritual structures, and age-old lineages. A multifaceted tradition, Daoism in the 2,500 years of its history has related to women in a number of different ways matching the complexity of other religions, where the relationship to the female is often ambiguous and ambivalent. They commonly see motherhood, sexuality, fertility, esoteric knowledge, and secret powers as closely linked with the feminine and evaluate these aspects positively. But many religions also relegate women to inferior status, considering them of a lower nature, impure and irresponsible, and often suppressing them with greater or lesser severity.¹

The complexity of women's positions is particularly poignant in the Daoist case, since the religion is caught between its ideal cosmological premise of the power of yin and the realities of a strongly patriarchal society following the Confucian model. That is to say, cosmologically Daoism sees women as expressions of the pure cosmic force of yin, necessary for the working of the universe, equal and for some schools even superior to yang. Daoism also links the Dao itself, the force of creation at the foundation of the cosmos, to the female and describes it as the mother of all beings. Within the religion there is a widespread attitude of veneration and respect for the feminine, honoring the cosmic connection as well as the productive and nurturing nature of women.

However, Daoism throughout its history has lived and breathed the social vision of mainstream Confucian society, which was patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal, and saw women as inferior to men. Traditional Chi-

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□ On women in various religions, see Plaskow and Romero 1974; Carmody 1979; Falk and Gross 1980; Sharma 1987; 1994; 2000; King 1997; Young 1999.

nese culture relegated women to the inner quarters of the house and prevented them from participating in decision-making and larger social issues (Ebrey 1993, 7-8). In Confucian thinking only sons were valued, since they alone could continue the family line and fulfill the ancestral obligations. Girls, often not even counted among a man's children, were commonly treated with disregard and contempt, considered a burden since they would eventually marry out and continue someone else's bloodline. They were not seen worthy of education, except in household skills, and their natural cycles rendered them impure and unsuitable for major responsibilities.

Women in Confucian China were defined largely through their relationships with men—being either daughters, wives, mothers, or widows. Already the *Liji* (Book of Rites) notes that they had the duty of “threefold obedience.” And the classic on Confucian women, the *Lienü zhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Women), ascribed to Liu Xiang (77-6 B.C.E.), says: “A woman needs someone to depend on. While her father is alive, she is dependent on him. While her husband is alive, she is dependent on him. And while her son is alive, she is dependent on him” (3.5a; Bumbacher 1998, 674; O'Hara 1980; Sung 1981; Raphals 1998). According to this model, men had full control over the lives and activities of their womenfolk, determining the training and treatment of their daughters, able to mistreat and divorce their wives at will, and shunning widows as outcasts and socially useless.² Wives in particular were easily rejected and divorced, for reasons including sterility, lewdness, disobedience to the parents-in-law, loquacity, stealing, jealousy, and having a repulsive disease (*Lienü zhuan* 2.5a; Gulik 1961, 266; Bumbacher 1998, 678). But many never even made it to the status of wife, reserved for the senior and legally married bride. Others were concubines or “little maids,” menial women with no property rights or status claims (Watson 1991, 233-34).

² □ Footbinding was one way in which women were controlled in traditional China. It made them into status symbols and expressions of conspicuous consumption (Ko 2001, 151; also Levy 1966; Paper 1997, 91-92; Ko 2002, 158; Ebrey 1993, 266). Female infanticide has been common (Gulik 1961, 111; Carmody 1979, 68). Widows were shunned and had low social standing (Waltner 1981, 131). See also Guisso 1981; Holmgren 1995; Watson and Ebrey 1991; Ebrey 1993.

A moving document of their plight is the poem by the scholar-official Fu Xuan (217-278 C.E.), contained in the *Yutai xinyong* (New Songs for a Jade Terrace), a sixth-century poetry collection:

Bitter indeed it is to be born a woman,
 It is difficult to imagine anything so low! . . .
 A girl is raised without joy or love,
 No one in her family really cares for her.
 Grown up, she has to hide in the inner rooms,
 Cover her head, be afraid to look others in the face.
 And no one sheds a tear when she is married off,
 All ties with her own kin are abruptly severed. . . .
 Her husband's love is as aloof as the Milky Way,
 Yet she must follow him like a sunflower the sun.
 Their hearts are soon as far apart as fire and water,
 She is blamed for all and everything that goes wrong.
 (Gulik 1961, 111-12)

This rather dismal picture of women's lives reflects the Confucian ideal, held up as a model to strive for but only partially realized in history. In actual fact, women in Chinese society had a great deal of freedom and responsibility. For example, women of the lower classes had to work hard outside the home, not only running households but also working in agriculture and business (Ko 1994). They interacted freely with men and were not restricted to their own homes (Bray 1997). If they ended up in the entertainment world, they were not inevitably chattels of cruel madams, but in some cases found "opportunities to develop their literary, musical, and artistic talents" in this milieu (Ebrey 1993, 5). Women of the upper classes similarly functioned as political and intellectual agents, not only educating their sons but also giving advice to their husbands and thus influencing policy making and social realities (Raphals 1998, 4, 259). These women, moreover, carried responsibility not only for their husband's clan but also maintained close relations to their native family, cementing social alliances and forging political bonds (Thatcher 1991, 45). They may not have mixed freely with males beyond their immediate household, but they created women's networks that carried considerable weight in the community (Bray 1997).

Mothers, moreover, were the object of the Confucian virtue of filial piety, which demanded respect for the mother and obedience to her wishes. Not entirely misogynous, Confucians acknowledged the importance of yin, paid veneration to the sacrality of the Earth, and honored their mothers—often matriarchs who ruled the household and educators who shaped the worldview of sons (Bumbacher 1998, 681; Paper 1997, 48).³ Still, women in traditional Chinese society were usually prevented from reaching more than a limited level of influence.

Also, social rules changed over time, so that, for example, divorce by mutual consent became legal in the Tang dynasty. Women from the Song onward maintained ownership of their dowry and could accumulate wealth in their own right (Ebrey 1991; 1993, 6). In the Ming and Qing women's overall literacy grew to the point that we know of over three thousand anthologies of women's poems from late imperial China (Grant 1996, 53; Chang and Saussey 1999). Widows, far from being only victims and outcasts, were often strong agents who made independent decisions, lauded highly if they remained true to their husband's clan (Ebrey 1993, 5, 204; Holmgren 1981; Mann 1987).

The overwhelming majority of women in traditional China married and did not pursue an independent career (Ebrey 1993, 7). Still, even if a woman remained largely in the inner quarters, this was not necessarily conceived as a limitation and restriction. There was also a dimension of the "marital relationship that emphasizes affection, partnership, and shared responsibility" (Mann 1991, 208; Overmyer 1981, 93), so that being in the house represented a position of safety and refuge. Women forced out of their seclusion due to political upheaval or economic hardship tended to express their yearning for the peace, tranquility, and security of the inner court (see Ko 2001). Staying at home, surrounded by familiar figures and things, performing tasks well under their control served as much to reassure the women's identity and self-worth as it helped to maintain the proper social order. Being a woman in Confucian

³ □ The importance of women in the education of boys also appears in contemporary Japan, where the trait of *amae* or "loving sweetness" is a key characteristic. See Doi 1973.

China, therefore, although at first glance a lowly and dependent situation, was not without benefits or flexibility.⁴

The roles of Daoist women in this context are complex. Normatively, Daoism reflects the mainstream vision of women, and female lay followers were usually married, subscribed to the program set out by society, and remained subject to Confucian restrictions. In other reflections of the mainstream ideal, there are also some Daoist practices that involve the exploitation of women, either sexually or socially. However, Daoism goes beyond mainstream Chinese values in that many of its strands propose a feminine ideal as cosmic yin and venerate important goddesses and immortals. These serve as models to living women. Daoism, moreover, offers a social alternative for women in that it opens paths to pursue their own goals as independent agents, be it the practice of self-cultivation, service as mediums, nuns, or priests, or attainment of immortality.

The following chapters survey and arrange examples culled from the historical record to illustrate changes in the Daoist preception and social situation of women. The historic record is used in a way similar to how a geologist uses the geological record: by noting changes in morphological structures we can become aware of the “surface conditions” found in different time periods. A recurrent theme that arises throughout is the control over the feminine body. As the definitions and means of control change, so do the roles and opportunities available for women in Daoist culture. Some of the issues raised accordingly include control over sexual bodies, the body of scripture, bodily nourishment, ritual garb, and the body as a gateway between society and transcendence, between microcosm and macrocosm. The volume will show how women in Daoism have appeared in various ideal forms and historical personages, reflecting both general cultural Chinese attitudes and the different organizational constellations within the religion. Without oversimplifying the

⁴ □ For more on women in Confucian society, see Gulik 1961; Wolf 1972; Wolf and Witke 1975; Guisso and Johannesen 1981; Overmyer 1981; Kristeva 1986; Chow 1991; Watson and Ebrey 1991; Ko 1994; Bray 1997; Mann 1997; Paper 1997; Raphals 1998; Zurndorfer 1999; Mann and Cheng 2001; Wang 2003. Women who rejected the stereotype tended to get a bad reputation. For example, Empress Wu (Fitzgerald 1955), Zixi (Bland 1910), and Jiang Qing (Witke 1977).

matter, one can distinguish five major visions and roles of women in Daoism, each dominant in a certain period of the religion's history. They are described in chronological order and begin with the vision of motherhood and the goddess, since the earliest extant sources deal with these issues. Women's body cultivation comes last because texts on the subject only appear in the late imperial period. The five roles and images are:

- (1) the female as mother, the life-giver and nurturing power of the universe—in ancient Daoism expressed in the philosophy of the *Daode jing* (Book of the Way and Its Virtue, ca. 350 B.C.E.) as well as in Daoist mother goddesses
- (2) women as representatives of the cosmic force of yin, complementary to the male or yang, reflecting both the universal presence of yin and its expression in sexuality and fertility—in Han-dynasty longevity practices and among early Daoist communities of the second century C.E.
- (3) women as divine teachers and bestowers of esoteric revelations, empowering adepts through instruction and direct interaction—in the Highest Clarity or Purity (Shangqing) movement of the fourth century
- (4) women as possessors of supernatural connections, healing powers, and shamanic techniques, leading to the emergence of powerful priests, founders, and matriarchs—in the high middle ages and well into the late imperial period (Tang through Ming)
- (5) the female body as the seat of essential ingredients and processes of spiritual transformation, understood in the terms of internal alchemy—in the late imperial and modern periods

The Dao as Mother

The veneration of motherhood in Chinese culture is strongly expressed in the ancient *Daode jing*, a collection of aphorisms associated with the legendary sage Laozi, the Old Master (see Henricks 2000; LaFargue 1992). The text represents the Dao as the great mother, the essential element of water that nurtures all, and possessed of feminine qualities of softness and weakness (Overmyer 1981, 92).

The Dao as mother is where all beings come from and to which they all return, the source and essence of the universe, the all-embracing and nurturing power at the root of all (Reed 1987, 162). Described variously (chs. 1, 20, 25, 32, 34), the Dao is called the womb of the universe that brings forth all and nurtures all; every being is part of a single, integrated organism that ultimately goes back to and is embraced by the Dao (Chen 1974, 57; 1969). People who attain the Dao consequently have total trust in it as their universal mother. They allow all changes and transformations—even death—to happen naturally and place themselves in the mother’s position at the mysterious center of the cosmos, where, as Ellen Marie Chen points out, “things at the same time emerge into the activities of life and return to the quietude of death” (1973, 235).

Other scholars also affirm the predominance of motherhood in the *Daode jing*, and some even explicitly associate the Dao with the great mother of mythology.⁵ Yet others see the feminine in the *Daode jing* as the true complement of the masculine and find that the realization of the sage in the world, rather than being a reduction to feminine values, lies in the reconciliation of opposites manifest in the embodiment of the Dao and the attainment of life as a consummate person who is neither feminine nor masculine (Ames 1981, 43). This androgynous ideal found in visions of the Dao, moreover, continues in the later tradition, where it appears in the form of various mother goddesses presented below.

Besides the strong emphasis on motherhood, the *Daode jing* also links the Dao with female animals (chs. 6, 10, 28, 61) and uses various symbols that indicate containing and latency—such as the empty vessel (ch. 4), the bellows (ch. 5), the dark unborn (ch. 1), water (chs. 6, 78), and the valley (chs. 6, 28, 32) (Chen 1974, 53). It also emphasizes that the Dao embraces all (chs. 27, 32), evenly spreads its goodness (ch. 32), and cherishes all beings with motherly love (ch. 67). It notes that the female overcomes the male by its quality of stillness (ch. 61) and that in order to attain union with the Dao one should abide by the female (ch. 28), cultivating the qualities of weakness and softness (Chen 1974, 51).

⁵ □ See Needham 1956; Erkes in Duyvendak 1954, 56. On the great mother in mythology, see Neumann; 1963; Preston 1982.

Here the image of the feminine is not entirely one of giving and nurturing, but contains elements associated with the darker side of yin, things like weakness, stillness, passivity, darkness, emptiness, and withdrawal. It reveals a more shadowy, mysterious, even uncanny side of the female—exalted in the *Daode jing* as the way to overcome and balance the dominant mode of the world, yet also linking women with rather somber and unassuming values. This reflects the mainstream ideal of Chinese culture, where women in general were sequestered in the inner chambers and encouraged to develop virtues that made them easy to control, such as chastity, modesty, meekness, and obedience. The *Daode jing*, therefore, in both its strong emphasis on motherhood and its characterization of the female as dark, weak, and withdrawing reflects standard Chinese attitudes toward women. But it also modifies these attitudes by placing a positive value on the female and contrasting it with the male, ruthless and scheming, ways of the world.