

Time in Daoist Practice

Cultivation and Calculation

edited by

Livia Kohn

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Acknowledgments

This book is the second volume of the project on “Dao and Time.” As its predecessor, *Dao and Time: Classical Philosophy* (Three Pines Press, 2021), it emerged from the 13th International Conference on Daoist Studies, “Dao and Time: Personal Cultivation and Spiritual Transformation.” Arranged by Robin Wang, the conference took place in June 2019 at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles in close proximity to the 17th Triennial Conference of the International Society for the Study of Time, organized by Paul Harris. I am deeply indebted to them both.

This volume focuses particularly on practice, led and inspired by our keynote speaker Hervé Louchouart (Instituto Daoista para la Salud, Guernavaca, Mexico), an ordained Daoist and long-term practitioner of Chinese medicine. It was his concern for, and dedication to, issues of time in the Daoist context that got me first interested in this important subject. Practice is a vast subject, any many presentations at the conference addressed its various aspects as do the contributions in this volume. Offered upon a call for papers, they make the creation of this and the other volumes possible.

As editor, I am deeply grateful to everyone involved in the project and particularly the contributors. Not only have they created exceptional work but they have also been wonderfully patient with the editing process. I am excited and pleased to be able to offer their work to the scholarly community in this volume.

—Livia Kohn, March 2021

Daoist Practice

and the Importance of Time

LIVIA KOHN

Daoism is notoriously difficult to classify in the greater spectrum of world religions. It is neither clearly an ethnic nor a universal religion, but combines elements of both. It fits to a certain degree into the mold of ancient cosmologies that see the world as cyclical and create ritual and other patterns to match the ebb and flow of the seasons. Yet it also has a distinctly linear outlook in its vision of Great Peace and the complete overcoming of the human condition in a utopian society.

The same tension between cyclical and linear also applies to its relationship to nature: for the most part Daoist practices serve to create greater harmony with nature, better health in the individual, and increased communication with the gods. But then there is also its ultimate goal of immortality, which involves the transcendence of all natural constrictions so that one can live in an utterly nonhuman manner: eating *qi* instead of food, flying through the air instead of walking, communing with spirits instead of people, serving as officials in the celestial administration instead of the local yamen, and living forever instead of undergoing death, rebirth, and ancestral veneration.

While all this makes it difficult to classify Daoism in a comparative framework, the picture is made more complex by the fact that the religion is also deeply embedded in Chinese culture, and often the boundaries between Daoism and other cultural aspects of China are blurred. The question “What is Daoism?” has plagued religion scholars and sinologists alike, and there is no easy answer. The boundaries between Daoism and mainstream thought, traditional cosmology, Chinese medicine, Buddhism, and popular religion are vague at best.

For example, even in its very early stages, the Daoist school of thought closely related to other forms of Chinese philosophy, the term *dao* being used by all to refer to the underlying patterns of the cosmos and ideal way of governing. Throughout its history, moreover, the religion has never lost its connection to the Confucian mainstream, extolling Confucian virtues, integrating Confucian ethical principles, and often working closely

with Confucians in the government of the empire. The same holds true for classical Chinese cosmology. Daoism actively participates in Chinese culture through the system of yin-yang and the five phases, a wide use of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), the traditional calendar, forms of fortune-telling (astrology, physiognomy), and various ways of manipulating *qi* (Fengshui, music, exercises). Although often called “Daoist,” there is nothing uniquely Daoist about them as such.

Similarly blurry boundaries exist between Daoist practice and Chinese medicine, Daoist and Buddhist forms of meditation and ritual, and between Daoist worship and popular cults. Throughout its history Daoism has continued to adapt to changing times by integrating new and varied forms of practice and visions of the universe. It has never stopped doing so, and the increasing popularity of Daoist healing and longevity techniques today testifies to this ongoing process of adaptation and transformation. While this explains the apparently amorphous nature of the religion and the wide variety of its concepts and practices, it also makes it even more difficult to pinpoint just exactly what makes Daoism unique.

The Universe

What makes Daoism unique within this network of connections and adaptations is its unwavering commitment to, and ultimate focus on, the greater universe as its main hub and central node. This finds expression most importantly in the concept of Dao as the underlying power that creates and supports everything in the best possible way and to which one can relate in a variety of ways: by establishing harmony from the cosmos on down through nature and society to body and mind and also by overcoming the limitations of the world and attaining ultimate freedom from time and space by merging with cosmic chaos at the core of all.

The strong Daoist emphasis on the cosmos further appears in the vision that there are multiple layers of heaven that not only store the sacred scriptures in their primordial form but also house pure, cosmic deities and transcendent bureaucrats. They are in turn aided by human priests who become their equals through ritual transformation, often in close connection with personal cultivation and an intimate relation to Dao. On a more elementary level, moreover, the universe plays a key role in the Daoist understanding of the human body and mind as a combination of different modes of cosmic and vital energy (*qi*), which can be made whole and healthy – and even transmuted into an immortal spirit entity – through the systematic and persistent application of longevity techniques, energy circulations, and advanced meditations.

Daoists thus differ from Confucians in that—without denying their value—they do not see social relationships and ethical rules as central aspects of life but use them to further a more fruitful relation to the universe. They expand on the traditional cosmology of yin and yang by proposing additional levels of heaven that are closer to the purity of creation and house uniquely Daoist gods. They work with the fundamental methods of Chinese medicine and emphasize health and long life, yet also take them to new heights by applying them to the transmutation into higher spheres of being.

In addition, Daoists add a dimension to popular religion by enabling their priests to become otherworld officials who engage in bureaucratic interactions with the divine, often winning lawsuits against spirits and successfully delivering people from the depths of hell. And they are clearly distinct from Buddhists not only because Daoist monks keep their hair and maintain relations to their native families while treating nuns and priestesses as equals, but also because they do not seek release from rebirth in the complete cessation of nirvana but find ultimate perfection in a permanent spirit existence in pure Dao as eternally present in the heavens above.

Daoist practice in this overall context occurs on all different levels and works with all different modalities. Thus, body-centered techniques involve certain health and preventative methods that also form part of Chinese medicine, including dietary regimens and sexual hygiene as much as *qi*-manipulation through self-massages and healing exercises, such as qigong and taiji quan. Mental and meditative practices adopt a great deal from Buddhism, notably mindfulness or insight meditation but also focused forms of concentration, seamlessly integrated with indigenous methods to form the full spectrum of Daoist meditation: from quiet sitting through visualization and observation to oblivion and the intricate energy refinement of internal alchemy. Socially relevant methods involve sets of precepts and communal rules, inspired by both Confucian and Buddhist models, as well as a plethora of rituals, many adapted from ancient court ceremonies, others—such as formal rites of repentance and rescues from hell—integrated from Buddhism.

Modes of Time

Time plays a central role in all these dimensions. In close alignment with the overall Daoist preoccupation with the greater universe, the key focus is on the heavens, the main timegivers in the sky. “The sky,” as John Durham Peters says, “is full of media, which are as diverse as the sky itself,” so that “the heavens are a source of legitimacy, meaning, and orientation for humans and animals” (2015, 165, 169). Calculated and predicted

by astronomers, the stars determine all cyclical, constant rhythms of life at the root of biological, conscious, and social structures. Measured and analyzed by meteorologists, they provide variable, irregular weather patterns that keep human beings on their toes. The sea and the sky are “extraterrestrial commons,” twin sublimities that ring the human estate, manifest in the two uncountable biblical magnitudes, “the sands of the sea and the stars in the sky,” both unlimited and infinite yet governed by numbers (2015, 165, 167).

The sky is compass, calendar, and clock that people can learn to read and interpret—except at the poles where the stars are invariant across the seasons and visually hidden in the long summertime. It is a map that allows people to figure out where they are on the surface of the earth. The sky is a cinema where people can look for portents and markers of identity, where the stars form the images of the zodiac, which the Romans called *signifer* or “carrier of signs.” And it is a source of information: the Babylonians saw writing in the sky, Plotinus understood the stars as celestial letters, and early Chinese sages identified their patterns as the core of divination and timekeeping (Peters 2015, 170).

Matching this, Daoists pay close attention to the sky, offering homage to the Northern Dipper and the Polestar in its center—the symbol of cosmic oneness at the core of creation—while observing the orbits of the sun and the moon and setting up detailed guidelines to match their course, divided into day, month, and year. Moving beyond the planets, they also follow the traditional Chinese calendar and work with man-made divisions such as the twenty-four solar periods and twenty-eight lunar stations.

Beyond this, they make ample use of the sexagenary cycle, another culturally determined way of measuring time. A combination of the ten heavenly stems and twelve earthly branches, it designates a variety of temporal units—from years through months and days to hours—in cycles of sixty, each with its own unique name and related meaning. In addition, and unlike mainstream Chinese culture, Daoists activate the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Yijing* in their own form of the calendar to designate phases of growth and decline and to mark certain temporal units with specific significance.

Moving even further, they closely work with time in the human body, linking certain features to stages of life and creating temporal rhythms by their own physical actions. They revert the flow of entropy within the body, establishing mastery over time, and transfigure their very physical constitution to a subtle level of high energy symmetry, opening the way to transcend time completely.

Cultivation and Calculation

These dimensions of time reach through each and every aspect of Daoist practice, working in the two different yet closely related modes of cultivation and calculation. Cultivation utilizes time marked by the planetary timegivers and calendar signifiers as either propitious or inappropriate for certain practices. For example, midnight when the sun reaches its nadir and is on its way up again, so that yang energy begins to rise, the time associated with the earthly branch *jia* 甲 and the trigram Kan 坎 (water), is the prime time for meditation and the guiding of vital energy. It is also, based on Chinese medicine, the time when among the major organs of the body the gallbladder is most active: the seat of toxin removal, overall restoration, and decision making, it creates clarity and brightness in the various functions of the body and is best supported by solid sleep, deep rest, or calm spiritual cultivation. Another example is the lunar cycle of the new and full moon, marked by various rituals and social activities that match the moon's impact on the water household of the world. A yet different dimension of time in cultivation is its shrinking or compression, a feature mostly activated in alchemy, so that one hour or day in active practice equals a season or a year in nature.

While time here applies universally to everyone in a given location and time zone, calculation is a great deal more personal. It focuses dominantly on prediction and sets the parameters for individual cultivation. Calculation works with divination, omens, and fortune-telling. To wit, divination involves ways of analyzing particular manufactured signs, physical forms imbued with meaning by the spirits, to recognize and appreciate developmental dynamics. This allows people to modify their behavior and adjust their timing to match circumstances in an optimal way. The most prominent forms of divination in traditional China are the oracle bones of the Shang dynasty and the hexagrams of the *Yijing* that came to the fore under the Zhou (Kohn 2021, 231).

Omens, in contrast, are naturally occurring signs that are observed at a given time and interpreted to predict a specific outcome. They signal various future events, not in a linear, cause-and-effect fashion but by non-locally connecting the present to underlying cosmic patterns. Utilized widely since ancient times, they include first of all positional changes or other irregularities in the stars, read to provide celestial guidance of when to sow and plant in agriculture, when to advance and retreat in warfare, as well as how to proceed in various other essential undertakings (Pankenier 2013, 78; Silvers 2005, 90).

Another common source of omens is found in animals who tend to be more sensitive to seismic and energetic changes than humans, reacting vis-

ibly to threatening situations such as earthquakes before they occur (Zohar 1983, 79). Some of them, such as the proverbial black cat or hooting owl, are associated with bad luck. Predictions based on the ominous appearance or behavior of animals, well documented from ancient Babylon to modern England, also appear frequently in the *Yijing*, notably the movements of pigs, the behavior of foxes, the manifestation of swarms of insects, and the flight pattern of birds (Waley 1933, 124-28). Birds, especially black birds, congregating around a certain house in many cultures are read as a sign that an inhabitant will die soon.

Moving beyond omens, fortune-telling centers on the specific characteristics of the person (Kohn 2021, 239). The most popular form in China involves the Eight Characters (*bazi* 八字)—the stems and branches for one’s year, month, day, and hour of birth. On their basis, Daoists as much as popular practitioners establish a horoscope for newborn babies but also for anybody at any age, providing guidance as to specific periods of prosperity and danger as well as marking major life events. They can calculate the overall course of destiny, the major changes that will occur in each decade of life, as well as more specific tendencies over just a few years. As Adeline Herrou says, citing a Daoist monk, “Fate always has a part on which one can act (good and bad fortune) and one about which one can do nothing (life’s destiny)” (2013, 199).

Another method of fortune-telling involves the casting of horoscopes, usually on the basis of one’s birth date in conjunction with the position of the stars and planets, not unlike the kind of destiny evaluation offered by astrologers in other cultures. Then again, more specific to China and also practiced by Daoists, is physiognomy, the “art to read the mind’s construction in the face” as Shakespeare described it. Physiognomy is a prognostication method that uses the shape and appearance of a person’s body and facial features to foretell the future. Its original system worked with the identification of certain parts of the face with specific periods of life so that a large chin, for example, indicated numerous descendants. In addition, masters would isolate single sections and analyze them in terms of their similarity to the looks of animals to foretell personality tendencies. Dragon and phoenix features, representing the countenance of an emperor, were considered most outstanding, while wolf and tiger characteristics showed a cruel and dangerous disposition (Kohn 2021, 238). Later, more sophisticated systems established closer links between certain facial features and time periods of one’s life, leading to subtler levels of prediction.

Temporalities

Whichever of these many modes they may work with, Daoists always engage with time to orient themselves toward its more underlying, universally earlier dimensions. Their ultimate goal, especially prevalent in internal alchemy and the pursuit of immortality but also vibrantly present in rituals—such as the rite of cosmic renewal or communal blessing (*jiao* 醮)—is the attainment of timelessness. Also called atemporality, timelessness marks the beginning of the universe, the state of pre-creation that cosmologists describe in terms of initial singularity, the concentrated, one-point beginning of all, a level of absolute potentiality both all-present and transtemporal (Fraser 1999, 27).

It is what religious thinkers call chaos, the *tohu wabohu* of the Bible and *hundun* 混沌 in Daoism, a term meaning “nebulous” or “confused” plus “muddled” or “turbid.” Described as a formless sack, an egg, or bubbling water—deep and abysmal—*hundun* designates a state without forms or names, where nothing can be perceived but which yet contains a high potentiality, a concentrated seed of being (Girardot 2008, 10; Jia 2021, 55). A key theme in Daoist cultivation, it marks the overarching goal of the restoration of original unity, the recovery of pre-creation potentiality, the ultimate overcoming of time and space, life and death (Kohn 2021, 245).

While atemporality signals the ultimate goal of Daoist cultivation, the entire complex of calculation works with prototemporality, a level of the early unfolding of the universe that marks time at its most primitive: instantaneous, synchronous, immediate, nonlocal. Its truth—defined as the particular knowledge “the organism may successfully employ in the control of its destiny” (Fraser 1990, 333)—is that of probabilities, inherent tendencies mixing and matching every which way, highly unstable in nature yet with permanent underlying laws. The best description of this level is through quantum physics, which works with the subtlest units of reality that can appear as waves or particles with equal ease and, in a nonlocal and entangled manner, can exist on multiple levels and in multiple states (Kohn 2021, 6).

The key feature of time at this level of existence is synchronicity, the meaningful coincidence of causally unrelated events—real and/or in the mind—happening at the same time. It expresses the functions of quantum reality, a cosmic order that is independent of human will, perceptual categories, and laws of causation. Here “all accepted boundaries between the knower and the known break down, and mind and matter come to be seen as extensions of each other” (Zohar 1983, 107). Daoists make use of this level to live in a more cosmic dimensions, accessing it through the various signals nature provides such as the constellations of the stars, the behavior

of animals, and the features of the face, as well as the signs manufactured in various modes of divination.

Looming over all this, and the key factor for the use of time in cultivation, is eotemporality, the way time works in the greater universe. Also known as planetary or deep time, it is the pure cosmic time of astronomical objects, directionless and reverting in cycles, an ahistoric world of dynamic balance (Gould 1987, 82). The movements and development of stars and planets, as all events and activities on this level, are constant and deterministic as well as fundamentally cyclical: countable, orderly, and systematic, symmetrical and enduring (Fraser 1999, 57). Their laws and numbers are visible and can be calculated; they apply to all levels, from minerals through crystals to plants, animals, and humans. In other words, just as atemporality rests at the universal origin and the quantum world of prototemporality pervades all life, so the reality of eotemporality is embedded deeply in all existing structures (Kohn 2021, 202).

Daoists are highly conscious of the close connection to the stars, seeing their movements as determining patterns of life on earth and placing the celestial administration in their sphere. They never tire to emphasize just how constant and permanent the stars are in their cyclical movements and continue to develop practices to match. They focus particularly on the sun and the moon, which they see as the epitome of yang and the celestial representative of yin (Schafer 1977, 167). They work with these core stars not only by adjusting their life and practices to their movements but also by intentionally aligning themselves with them—both in ecstatic excursions that take them into the heavenly spheres and in meditations that allow them to absorb the stars' vital essences and make them part of their bodies. Daoist cultivation in all its different dimensions thus relies on eotemporality, again raising the human to the cosmic.

The human level in its turn is defined by three further temporalities: the biotemporality of the body, its organic rhythms and life cycles; the noötemporality of the mind and brain with their conceptions (or rather, constructions) of past, present, and future; and the sociotemporality of the world of communal living with its philosophical speculations, visions of historical development, and organizational structures such as calendars and schedules (see Kohn 2021). Daoists are keenly aware of all these dimensions and take care to support and enhance them, guiding people to adjust to circadian rhythms and seasonal changes, fulfill the demands of ancestral inheritance and needs for future planning, and lead a life that flows smoothly in society. But they always have their eyes on the larger spheres, always strive to reach beyond, always connect to the universe as the central root and ultimate goal.

Thus, they expand biotemporality to include the stars and planets, enhance sociotemporality by creating a subtle awareness of, and keen alignment to, the underlying patterns of the quantum world, and develop noötemporality to transform the mind toward more cosmic dimensions and open it to the ultimate state of timelessness at the core of creation.

This Book

Discussing an array of representative aspects of time in Daoist practice, this book divides into three parts, focusing on different modes: planetary, calendar, and body time. Setting the theme, moreover, is an initial overview by the keynote speaker at the conference on “Dao and Time,” Hervé Louchouart. In his “Dao Defines Time and Health,” he outlines just how Daoists deciphered the dynamic structure of the cosmos through the observation of the patterns of the stars, the movement of the planets, and other celestial phenomena. This led not only to the creation of various systems of time measurement and organized calendars, but also to an understanding of the macrocosm and its impact on the microcosm of the natural world and the human body.

Celestial movements, Daoists found, determine the nature and quality of time and the seasons, which exert a strong impact on human physiology, psychology, and social life. In response, Daoists developed a philosophy of prevention and remediation, known as the art of “nurturing life” (*yangsheng* 養生). In contrast to modern mainstream culture, which has separated from the natural cycles and created conditions that are unhealthy and even actively detrimental, Daoists match the planetary cycles in determining just what kinds of nourishment and activities people should use. They thereby restore the purity of organic living and increase well-being on earth.

While this outlines the Daoist enterprise as a whole, the first part of the book, on “Planetary Time,” focuses more specifically on the role of the celestial bodies in the Daoist understanding and application of time. It begins with Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik’s work on “Defining Time: The Codes of Yin-Yang in Han Murals.” She shows how tombs with murals in the Han dynasty imitated the structure of the universe as understood in astronomical and cosmological theories. Extant tombs consist of several chambers arranged in a square or rectangular lay-out to represent earth and covered by a domed ceiling in imitation of the sky or heaven. On the lower part of the walls, murals show activities the deceased enjoyed in life, while the ceiling and upper walls represent the greater universe, sometimes mixed with the immortal or heavenly paradise, and indicate the soul’s transformation toward a more planetary dimension.

The celestial world defines time and space: it closely matches the polarity of yin and yang, expressed as sun and moon, the creator gods Fuxi and Nüwa, and the cosmic deities Queen Mother of the West and Lord King of the East. Moving beyond this elementary polarity, the tombs also show the five phases, the twenty-eight lunar stations, and other constellations, as well as the four main divisions of the sky, represented by major constellations known as the four heraldic animals or four heraldic animals. Overall, they recreate the external cosmos in miniature to capture constancy in the ongoing dynamic of change. By merging with the power of time, they express the belief—in anticipation of later Daoist visions—that the soul of the deceased could attain immortality, that is, find a stable resting place within the perpetual changes of the cosmos.

A similar scenario also applies in later Daoist cultivation, as Bede Benjamin Bidlack shows in “Waves of Time: Body and Time in Internal Alchemy.” He examines particularly various body charts and temporal models as presented in Xiao Yingsou’s 蕭應叟 (fl. 1226) commentary to the *Duren jing* 度人經 (Scripture of Universal Salvation), a key document of the Numinous Treasure school. Taking formal precepts to attain moral purity and retreating to a sacred space, adepts would chant the scripture while internally transforming themselves to subtler states.

Two key diagrams illustrate the cosmic nature of the body as well as the structure of time. First, the *Mountain Diagram* shows the adept’s body in the form of a mountain and prescribes precise times for firing the internal elixir in close alignment with the sun, moon, and planets. Next, the *Mirror Diagram*, in continuation of the ancient diviner’s compass, provides detailed calendrical information as well as exact timing and duration of the firing cycles. In concentric rings, it shows the eight trigrams, the twenty-eight lunar stations, the monthly phases of the moon, the twenty-four solar periods, the four seasons, the five phases, and more, strongly investing the practitioner with a keen awareness of the cosmic cycles to be joined.

A yet different dimension of planetary time is explored by Jeffrey Koryk in his “Horoscopy in Tang Daoist Astrology.” Horoscopy is the production of charts indicating the positions of planets at any given point in time, from which prognostications are made, that is, it represents the systematic exploration of the planets in relation to individuals, focusing particularly on the time of birth. The technique became part of medieval Daoism in the 8th century, a time when much foreign culture was imported into the empire.

Two texts are most important: the *Lingtai jing* 靈臺經 (Scripture of the Spiritual Terrace) and the *Miyao jing* 祕要經 (Scripture of Secret Essentials). They reveal a system that contains many elements of Hellenistic and Arab

astrology but also includes specifically Daoists forms of astral magic, notably rituals directed at specific planetary deities and the importance of the Northern Dipper. Altogether, Daoists blended foreign and domestic traditions to negotiating fate as determined through astrological means.

Next, LoAn Guylaine Tran, in “One Day in Heaven Is Ten Thousand Days on Earth,” demonstrates just how planetary time works in Daoist practice today. Not only is each individual’s destiny determined by the stars, but the purpose of human life is to be in harmony with the cycles of heaven and earth, to foster the natural life force. Thus, the schedule and rhythm of the temple follow the course of time as determined by the sun and the moon, each season and month with its own unique patterns, attributes, and activities.

Each part of the day, too, has its particular duties and engagements, services and meals plus sessions of personal cultivation, all in close alignment with the demands of the organs whose energetic dominance changes with the twelve double-hours of the day. Throughout, there is cause for reflection, sparked by questions the resident master keeps on asking about personal identity and destiny as well as by encounters with lay followers who come for help and succor. Central to the entire enterprise, however, remains the pursuit of the timeless, of constancy in the midst of change, of pure Dao at the core of creation. Time in practice is determined by the stars, but the more one aligns with them the easier it is to also go beyond, to move to a sphere where time stops and the universe falls away.

Predictions and Measurements

From here, the second part of the book, on “Calendar Time,” discusses time as defined by certain man-made structures that bear some relation to the stars and planets but have taken on their own power and created their own dynamic. It begins with Zhongxian Wu’s “Stems and Branches: The Celestial Time River.” The ancient Chinese worked with a ten-day week, giving a unique name to each day; they also observed the planet Jupiter and its twelve-year orbit around the sun, designating each of its positions by a particular character. The two resulting lists were known as the ten heavenly stems and twelve earthly branches, then combined to create sixty temporal designations of two characters each, known as the sexagenary cycle.

The cycle not only structures time and gives meaning to years and days but is also highly relevant for predictions as can be seen in conjunction with various current events. In addition, each stem and branch can be activated in the body through specific methods of internal cultivation that allow the direct experience of the universal time river in one’s very own

body. Whether in calculation or cultivation, activating meaningful time as defined by the stems and branches is a powerful tool to improve health challenges and optimize the trajectory of life.

Expanding on this, Thomas Kuan presents “The Eight Characters: Designating Time in Personal Learning.” The Eight Characters are the combined designations of a certain year, month, day, and double-hour in the format of the stems and branches. Those of a person’s birth form the foundation of traditional fortune-telling, since they contain information relevant for the entire life—health, wealth, romantic relationships, challenges, lucky periods, ancestral support, and more.

Closely linked with the five phases in their productive or control cycles, the Eight Characters are still widely used today to find the ideal marriage partner, enhance relationships, select dates for auspicious outcomes, and other decisions of life. People also turn to them to uncover vocations, decode talents, identify opportunities, and understand clashes and conflicts in life; some corporations even utilize them to select suitable candidates for key positions.

One aspect in this context is personal learning, not unlike the Western system of learner’s autonomy profiling (LAP). For example, someone with a “wood” disposition born under the stem *jia* tends to learn slowly and steadily, preferably on his own. Similarly, LAP seeks to understand how an individual’s behavioral intentions, like the desire to learn, affect the focus of internal resources, the taking of initiatives, and the development of persistence. The two systems have much in common, and traditional calendar time can play an important role in an active contemporary and comparative context.

A somewhat different application of calendar time appears in Friederike Assandri’s “What’s in a Date? Calculating the Lifetime of Laozi.” Focusing on the early Tang dynasty, she analyzes calculations of the historical lifetime of Laozi, one by the Buddhist monk Falin 法林 (572-640), the other by the Daoist abbot Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (604-690). The Tang ruling house, having adopted Laozi as their original ancestor, required a precise and uncontroversial date of his lifetime, an account that fit with knowledge established in historical sources and proved the superiority of the indigenous religious over the foreign creed of Buddhism.

Thus, Laozi’s lifetime—traditionally seen as an ongoing process of cyclical reappearances—was contextualized within a linear historical time frame of specific events. Various calculations were offered that tended not to agree with each other as they were based on different raw data, applied different tools, and combined methods and assumptions differently and under a variety of considerations. Throughout, though the calendar was of

central importance, a key factor defining the identity of the Daoist religion in medieval China.

Shifting identity to a more cosmic level, the calendar was also important in internal alchemy. As Juntao Li shows in his “Cosmic Body Charts and the Twenty-four Solar Periods,” besides the five phases and the sexagenary cycle, traditional Daoists designated time with twelve waxing and waning hexagrams and divided the year into twenty-four solar periods. They illustrated this in various charts and diagrams.

First, the *Taiji tu* 太極圖 (Diagram of the Great Ultimate) shows the unfolding of the universe and the reversal of this process in the stages of internal alchemy. Next, the *Xiuzhen tu* 修真圖 (Chart of the Cultivation of Perfection) documents the internal circulation of *qi* in alignment with the natural cycles by presenting the thirty lunar phases in the course of the month in a chain of globes around the torso and the twenty-four solar periods of the year along the vertebrae of the spine. Third, the *Neijing tu* 內經圖 (Chart of Internal Passageways) links specific hexagrams with the solar periods and provides detailed descriptions and instructions for practice, notably the reversal of essence, the transformation of kidney water toward heart fire, and the establishment of the internal circulation of the microcosmic orbit to restore and enhance the inherent power of spirit.

Bodily Activation

The third part of the book thematizes “Body Time,” the way various temporal dimensions in Daoist practice play out in the human body. This is most obvious in fortune-telling on the basis of facial features, as documented by Xing Wang in “Time in the Body: Fortune, Dao, and Physiology in Ming Physiognomy.” Prominent since antiquity and documented variously, physiognomy came into its own in the Ming dynasty, when more systematic works were compiled. Primary among them is the *Shenxiang quanbian* 神相全編 (Compendium of Divine Physiognomy), which outlines a potent theory on how the particular tendencies over a person’s lifetime manifest in the spatial-physiological structure of the face.

For this, it presents thirteen key points, vertically aligned along the central line of the face, from forehead to lower jaw, that indicate events in the course of life, from age 16 to 71. Spatial and morphological features of the face represent a pattern of temporal movement, so that, if one area shines with luminous *qi* and has good complexion, flesh and bones being in appropriate condition, the person will have a propitious life in the matching time period. Time and space are unified in the human body, and Ming texts often use the philosophical concept of Dao to describe this unity, suggesting that the human body resembles the time and space in the

cosmos. Physiognomy in many ways is thus similar to ways of reading the cosmos, such as astrology or geomancy.

While here the body is used to determine the impact of time, in a different mode of Daoist practice, the body is used to manipulate it. As Hsiuchuan Yang demonstrates in “Timing through Sound in Daoist Ritual,” sound is a major characteristic of all forms of Daoist ritual as observed in the Tainan area today – as much in requiem services or purgations (*zhai* 齋) for the dead as in rites of cosmic renewal or communal blessings (*jiao* 醮) for the living. Sound appears in a variety of different forms, notably chants, recitations, songs, and instrumental music. Its complex presence punctuates the patterns of the rites, lends rhythm to the proceedings, and communicates different ritual dimensions. Sound by its very nature develops in time and drives the advancement of time; it presents a dynamic and narrative form of expression.

As evident from a detailed examination of the noon offering, the occurrence of sound in the ritual space is not merely auxiliary or catalytic, but of the essence, marking major transitions from one level of ritual performance to the next, opening the potential for different degrees of dramatic emphasis, and offering the officiating priest ways of speeding up or slowing down the overall duration. Relevant factors in this context are the choice of chant, the selection of melody, the number of verses, the application of repetitions, and the use of various vocal and instrumental techniques. Sound is both an expression of time and a key medium of its modification, the very body of the priest as he utters the ritual chant determining the duration and immediacy of ritual presence.

A combination of both, alignment to and control of time through the body, becomes apparent in Fabrizio Pregadio’s “Views of Time in Chinese Alchemy,” presenting key facets of both Waidan (external) and Neidan (internal) practice. Time performs a crucial function in the two main sequences of “inversion” used in Daoist alchemy in general, one based on the representation of cosmogony in the *Daode jing* (Dao → 1 → 2 → 3), the other based on its representation in the *Yijing* (1 → 2 → 4).

Both are key to alchemical practice, which strives to reverse the course but not without first working on alignment to daily, monthly, and yearly cycles, as described in the *Cantong qi* 參同契 (Seal of the Unity of the Three), the main text of both systems. A more active and intentional control of time comes into play in the “fire phases” (*huohou* 火候), again essential in both branches but of particular importance in the Neidan practice of the “celestial circuit” (*zhoutian* 周天). Beyond this, Daoists also condense time, so that the 30,000 segments of the ten months of embryonic gestation correspond to a cosmic cycle of 30,000 years, making practitioners immortal and powerful beyond all temporal constrictions.

To conclude, my own “Seeker’s Progress: Mystical Temporalities in Daoist Cultivation” pulls the various strands together as it shows how mystics in general and Daoists in particular change their way of being in time in the course of their cultivation progress. They begin their career with conversion, an unexpected and singular experience. Stimulated by a dream, vision, disease, or strange encounter, they open for a short moment to prototemporal reality, connect to the power of Dao, and turn their life around, setting out on the quest for perfection.

In contrast, training proceeds over long periods and involves frequent repetition. Series of tests and trials—classically associated with the purgative life—ensure that they are free from social conditioning and emotional reactions. Intense training in a variety of methods, matching the illuminative life, restructures their identity in body and mind, while extensive travels, in Daoism called “cloud wandering,” offer new perspectives and advanced techniques. The cyclical regularity of repetitive in close association with the celestial bodies connects adepts to eotemporality.

Eventually they attain oneness or union in perfection or immortality, entering the sphere of timelessness or atemporality, manifest both in a sense of permanence and powerful immediacy of the present moment.

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