

# **What is Daoism?**

*A Look Into the Creation of Daoism and its Continued  
Influence in China*

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Due to political unrest China beginning in the sixth century BCE, Confucianism and Daoism, which both sought balance and harmony, quickly became popular. Both Daoists and Confucianists thought that balance and harmony with the Dao would restore security and order to China, but they disagreed on how to get there. Confucianism was primarily concerned with the interactions of people and outlined the social norms to ensure harmony.<sup>1</sup> Daoism focused on the connection of human beings to nature, and how to return to naturalness and experience the Dao. The essential element of philosophical Daoism is making a person open to direct experience of the Dao so they can find harmony and live a long and tranquil life. This was first outlined in the *Dao de Jing* by Laozi, the founder of Daoism. Religious Daoism was not institutionalized until later in the second century CE, when Zhang Daoling received his first series of revelations; and later began the True Unity of Celestial Masters, which had its own practices, institutions, and gods. Over the two thousand years that Daoism has been in China, it has influenced their culture and still has a significant impact today.

The earliest codification of the Daoist ideals was in the sixth century BCE by a man named Laozi, who became so concerned with the degeneration of the society around him that he decided to leave. Historians now believe that no such person existed; however, it is still convenient for historians to call him the author of the *Dao de Jing* and the founder of Daoism since that is what is believed by Daoists.<sup>2</sup> According to legend, a gatekeeper asked him to write a short account of his philosophy before he left for the benefit of his society. Laozi reluctantly agreed, since he believed that the medium of writing distorted the truth. What he wrote came to be known as the *Dao de Jing* (Classic of the Way and its Power), which described the meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 173.

<sup>2</sup> Smart, Ninian. *Religions of Asia*, 1993: 172.

of the Dao and the Virtue.<sup>3</sup> This text combines religion, philosophy, poetry, and mysticism while explaining the ideas most central to Daoism.<sup>4</sup> However, this text makes no claim of originality and instead stresses that his thoughts align with sages of the past who also understand the complex workings of the universe.<sup>5</sup>

Laozi explains that the Dao is the bipolarity of nature expressed in the dynamic interplay between yin and yang, characterized by continual transformation. The Dao is made up of the two polarities *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* is attributed to things that are yielding, passive, wet, and feminine while *yang* is dry, active, aggressive, and masculine. Originally, these terms were used for referring to the shady and sunny sides of mountains, but they were later incorporated into Daoism. Even though they appear to be opposites, each contains elements of the other and their interactions form changes within the natural world.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, everything in its natural state in the world is harmonious and good because of the Dao. However, the Dao does not exert any force but still holds immense influence. Laozi expands on this mysticism in the *Dao De Jing* by writing, “The Dao that can be told of is not the real Dao...This nameless thing is the origin of heaven and earth; One may call it the Mother of all things.”<sup>7</sup> This passage states that the Dao is inconceivable for people, and that it is the origin of all things. This connects to Laozi’s idea that writing distorted the truth. The Dao cannot be adequately explained or conceptualized because it exceeds human intellectual understanding.<sup>8</sup> Thus, trying to explain it to understand it waters it down until it is not the real Dao, which is something that cannot be explained.

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<sup>3</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 179.

<sup>4</sup> Smart, Ninian. *Religions of Asia*, 1993: 172.

<sup>5</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 174.

<sup>6</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 174.

<sup>7</sup> Smart, Ninian. *Religions of Asia*, 1993: 172-173.

<sup>8</sup> Smart, Ninian. *Religions of Asia*, 1993: 173

Although the Dao cannot be explained, a direct experience of the Dao is necessary for a sage to find true harmony with one's environment and live a long life, which is the goal of Daoism. A sage is someone who understands and embodies the Dao. But for a person to embody the Dao, they must open themselves up to the experience. There are obstacles to this, however; for example, the senses in combination with intellect trick people into thinking that ordinary perceptions provide a true picture of reality.<sup>9</sup> Sages are instructed to cast off words and reasoning, instead focusing on emptying themselves to have a direct experience of the Dao. If a person is properly in tune with the Dao, they do not have anxiety. This is because they have learned to forget knowledge, the distinctions between good and evil, and the value systems that the ordinary world is based on. A sage is empty of these ideas and can see things as they really are: all part of the ultimate harmony of the Dao.<sup>10</sup>

To not act through the Dao is to act selfishly, because when humans think, they scheme for selfish ends. Laozi explains that selfish action, *wei*, is always harmful since it is not in harmony with the Dao. Thus, nonaction, *wu-wei*, is the best option. A sage does not act; instead, the Dao acts through him.<sup>11</sup> Laozi wrote about this phenomenon in the *Dao de Jing*, and said, "hearing the Dao leads to daily decrease. Decrease and decrease again until you reach nonaction."<sup>12</sup> This passage details that when a person learns of the Dao, everything within them, such as thoughts, wishes, or desires, decreases until the Dao begins to act through him. This highlights the importance of emptiness in combination with nonaction. If you submit yourself to the Dao, you will learn to go with the flow. However, this does not mean to do nothing, instead it

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<sup>9</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 174.

<sup>10</sup> Smart, Ninian. *Religions of Asia*, 1993: 175

<sup>11</sup> Smart, Ninian. *Religions of Asia*, 1993: 174

<sup>12</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 174.

means to not exert unnecessary force. The Daoist sage seeks harmony within himself and in that process, loses himself to the Dao, which then begins to act for him. Nonaction is a great example of losing oneself to the Dao and moving to the natural rhythms of the world, since the Dao is amongst the most natural things in the world.

Although Laozi described the Dao as the origin of all things, he also compared the operations of the Dao to the movement of water. He explains that when water encounters a hard obstacle, it simply flows around it instead of stopping. Water does not fight against obstacles in its path and instead goes around them, finding the path of least resistance. While it goes around, it wears down the obstacle such as a rock, until over time the obstacle is broken down or gone entirely. In the *Dao de Jing*, Laozi wrote, “it is best to be like water; which benefits the ten thousand things and does not compete.”<sup>13</sup> This passage shows Laozi’s emphasis placed on sages being like water, soft and yielding, to achieve harmony. This connects to the Daoist philosophical principle of *wu-wei*, or nonaction. When a person practices nonaction and lets the Dao act through them, they find the obstacles in their path to be no longer there; they have flowed right by them, and over time they even break these obstacles down. Laozi stated that the person who does this benefits ten thousand things, showing that when a person surrenders themselves to the Dao, they get many benefits.

Another important philosophical element of Daoism is the way of nature or naturalness. Daoism focuses on the connections between people and their natural environment. Laozi focused on how people do not need rituals to know how to interact with each other, and instead believed that people should interact with nature. Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi wrote, “the sage leans on

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<sup>13</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 183.

the sun and the moon, tucks the universe under his arm, merges himself with things, leaves the confusion and muddle as it is,” and continues to explain how the sage transcends ordinary limitations by being one with nature.<sup>14</sup> This passage illustrates that when the sage puts his trust in the natural things around him, he leaves the ordinary world behind and becomes something more. The sage no longer troubles himself with human worries and desires since these worldly concerns no longer apply to him. Laozi had a similar view of the importance of naturalness which can be seen in *The Dao De Jing*. Laozi compares humans at birth to blocks of wood with unsymmetrical and rough edges, saying they are like natural phenomena that have not been tampered with. In the *Dao de Jing*, he prescribes that people “return to the state of the uncarved block.”<sup>15</sup> This passage highlights the emphasis Laozi placed on returning to one’s most natural state to connect with the Dao. Laozi believes that humans are put in unnatural situations that dissipate their energies uselessly and stresses the importance of returning to one’s original form before anything was tampered with.

Although Laozi was the founder of Daoism, he was not the only major figure of the early Daoist mystical tradition. Zhuang-zi, another major figure, told stories that sought to describe practical procedures and the inner workings of Daoist life.<sup>16</sup> Zhuang-zi prescribed fasting, breath control, and physical exercise to calm the mind and turn it away from external distractions and towards the inner Dao. Then he believed that the power from the Dao appears spontaneously and flows into the person to achieve great things.<sup>17</sup> Zhuang-zi often used parables to express his philosophy, such as “Mastering Life”, which tells the story of a wood maker who was praised for

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<sup>14</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 193.

<sup>15</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 184.

<sup>16</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 175.

<sup>17</sup> Smart, Ninian. *Religions of Asia*, 1993: 175

making the most perfect bell stand. He claimed that this was a result of his seven days of fasting and journey into the forest. The wood maker, Qing, explained that after three days of fasting he no longer thought of rewards or congratulations, after five days he no longer thought of praise or skill, and after seven he forgot that he had a form and a body. At that point, Qing would venture into the woods where all distractions faded away and examined the heavenly nature of the trees, “If I find one of superlative form, and I can see a bell stood there, I put my hand to the job of carving; if not, I let it go.”<sup>18</sup> This parable shows that if it was not for the focus that Qing had because of his fasting, he never would have known which tree to pick when the Dao acted through him. In this parable, Zhuang-zi shows fasting as a technique to calm the mind and get rid of external distractions to focus on the inner Dao. If Qing had not been focused, he would not have been able to know which tree was right for carving. He put his trust in the inner Dao knowing that it would guide him the right way. This connected to what Zhuang-zi believed to be the “true man”, or someone who embodied and became one with the Dao. He explains that the “true man” had no appeal to rank or reward and was not always deciding between yes or no. Qing was his ideal “true man” as he did not want high rank or reward and left the decision on which tree up to the Dao rather than himself. This was a common theme in Zhuang-Zi’s writings as he focused on the way of the sage.

As political and civil unrest continued in China in the third century BCE, the powerless and poor looked for refuge within popular Daoism. Institutionalized Daoism was also in part created as a response to the unequal and elitist Confucian class during the second half of the Han Dynasty. However, the establishment of Daoism as a distinctive religious tradition dates back to 142 BCE when Zhang Daoling received the first series of revelations from the Lord Lao the

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<sup>18</sup> Smart, Ninian. *Religions of Asia*, 1993: 175

Most High.<sup>19</sup> As a result, he became the head of the first community of Daoist monks. Zhang Daoling became known as the first Heavenly Teacher and spread the teachings he had learned and later created the True Unity of Celestial Masters, the first organized Daoist system. Zhang Daoling became the ruler of this Daoist sect because of a series of revelations he received from Taishang Laojun, who was believed to be the personification of the Dao, believed to be Laozi. They believed that Laozi was the Dao taking human form to teach the truth to humans.<sup>20</sup>

During the second half of the Han Dynasty two major Daoist religious sects were active: the Celestial Master and the Yellow Turbans. Both sects emphasized the art of healing, confession of sins, and magical rituals.<sup>21</sup> They were both Utopian communities with political ambition. The idea of a utopia was followed more closely by the Yellow Turbans who called themselves the followers of the *Tai Ping Dao*, or the “Way of the Grand Peace”, and thought they could achieve this ideal through purification ritual and rituals that expressed the harmony that is in all things.<sup>22</sup> Religious Daoism was concerned with techniques that lead to immortality, which was gained by being in harmony with the Dao. This could be achieved by external alchemy where a person would ingest a mixture of cinnabar (red mercury ore) and gold which symbolized indestructible life or internal alchemy which included yoga, meditation, breathing exercises, or the retention of semen and breath. The goal of alchemy was to transform oneself to experience the Dao.<sup>23</sup> Religious Daoism had these specific practices for people to connect more closely with nature and the Dao to achieve the goal of immortality.

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<sup>19</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 176.

<sup>20</sup> Fieser, James, and John Powers. *Scriptures of the East*. McGraw-Hill Humanities, Social Sciences & World Languages, 1998: 176.

<sup>21</sup> Smart, Ninian. *Religions of Asia*, 1993: 178

<sup>22</sup> Smart, Ninian. *Religions of Asia*, 1993: 178

<sup>23</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. “Daoism | Definition, Origin, Philosophy, Beliefs, & Facts,” August 9, 1999. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Daoism/Development-of-the-Daoist-religion-from-the-2nd-to-the-6th-century>.

Daoism began when Laozi was told to write down his philosophy for the betterment of society before he disappeared, never to be heard from again. Daoism emphasized the importance of connection with nature to achieve harmony and balance in the world. While the other dominating Chinese religion at the time, Confucianism, was criticized for being elitist, Daoism was a religion for everyone regardless of their social standing or gender. A few generations later religious Daoism emerged focusing on the path to immortality such as internal and external alchemy. The religious groups the Celestial Masters and Yellow Turbans were repressed at the time, but the order of celestial masters went underground and survives to this day.

The order of the Celestial Masters was a popular Daoist movement that occurred near the end of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE- 220 CE).<sup>24</sup> This movement was initiated by Zhang Daoling early in the second century. Zhang became well known as a faith healer who claimed to have had a revelation from the great Laozi. The deified Laozi was said to bestow upon him, “orthodox and sole doctrine of the authority of the covenant.”<sup>25</sup> This doctrine was meant to be a replacement for popular religious practices of the time, which Laozi viewed as demonic and degenerate. Zhang’s movement took the byname of the “five pecks of rice” because of the five pecks of rice a year that clients either paid him for dues or for a cure. The greatest concerns of this group were just actions and works in accordance with the Dao and ensuring immunity from disease. The Celestial Masters became a prototype for religiously inspired rebellions throughout China for the next 2,000 years and continues to survive to this day.

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<sup>24</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Tianshidao | Daoism.” Encyclopaedia Britannica, July 20, 1998. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tianshidao>.

<sup>25</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Daoism | Definition, Origin, Philosophy, Beliefs, & Facts,” August 9, 1999. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Daoism/Development-of-the-Daoist-religion-from-the-2nd-to-the-6th-century>.

From 200-700 CE Daoism's popularity grew quickly in China, however Daoism began to face competition from Buddhism as missionaries came from India. Daoism and Buddhism had fundamentally opposed views. For example, Buddhists believe that life is suffering while Daoists believe that life is generally a happy experience that should be supplemented with virtue and balance. These two religions came into conflict as they both tried to become the official religion of the Imperial Court. During the Tang Dynasty, which ruled from 618-906 CE, Daoism was the official religion, but it was replaced by Buddhism for many of the next dynasties following it. In 1279-1368, during the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty, the Daoists tried to gain the favor of the court but lost after a series of debates with the Buddhists. Following the loss, many Daoist texts were destroyed. This began the long pattern of Daoism as an official religion of China being forced out of the spotlight.<sup>26</sup>

The attempts to get rid of Daoism in China continued into the twentieth century as well, following the communist takeover in 1949. During this period, Daoism, Confucianism, and other religions were banned.<sup>27</sup> As can be expected, this caused a major decline in the number of practicing Daoists and all other religions in China. Once again Daoism was excluded or forced out by the institutional power in China, as it was during the thirteenth century dynasties. Further, in 1966-1976 during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, many Daoist temples were destroyed. Thankfully, in the 1980s many temples were restored due to economic reforms. This once again highlights the resilience of this practice. Currently in China, there are 25,000 practicing Daoist priests and nuns in over 1,500 temples.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Chiu, Lisa. "Daoism in China." Learn Religions, July 15, 2019. <https://www.learnreligions.com/daoism-in-china-688148>.

<sup>27</sup> "Taoism," n.d. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/taoism/>.

<sup>28</sup> Chiu, Lisa. "Daoism in China." Learn Religions, July 15, 2019. <https://www.learnreligions.com/daoism-in-china-688148>.

Daoism has influenced Chinese culture for over 2,000 years and continues to this day. The practices of Daoism have created martial arts such as Tai Chi and Qigong and have influenced people's lives by promoting vegetarianism and physical exercise. The texts of Daoism have also had significant influence on Chinese views on morality and the right ways of behavior, regardless of a person's religious affiliation.<sup>29</sup> In Chinese religion, Daoism usually serves as a link between the Confucian tradition and folk tradition.<sup>30</sup> This is because Daoism tends to be more spontaneous and popular than Confucianism but less diffuse and shapeless than folk religions.

Ian Johnson, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who focuses on religion in China, explains that Daoism is the weakest official Chinese religion in terms of its organization of members and place of worship. However, he argues that the importance of Daoism comes from the fact that it underlies a lot of Chinese cultural practices that carry various spiritual or religious meanings to people. Everything from the practice of meditation to the way people build their homes, to the spatial arrangement of things in relation to their energy (feng shui) can be attributed to Daoism. These reasons show how despite Daoism's relatively weak position in modern day China, many common Chinese cultural rituals and practices stem originally from Daoism.<sup>31</sup>

Like almost every other aspect of life, the practice of Daoism in China was changed dramatically by the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic. Zhu Yiwen, a Daoist studies researcher based in Shanghai explained the change in religious practices specifically in Shanghai. The Daoist City

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<sup>29</sup> "Daoism in China." Learn Religions, July 15, 2019. <https://www.learnreligions.com/daoism-in-china-688148>.

<sup>30</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Tianshidao | Daoism." Encyclopaedia Britannica, July 20, 1998. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tianshidao>.

<sup>31</sup> The World From PRX. "Daoism Gains a Foothold, Again, in China," January 30, 2015. <https://theworld.org/stories/2015-01-30/daoism-gains-foothold-again-china>.

God temple in Shanghai is one of the biggest in the city. Before the pandemic, visitors would come daily to visit the temple, and donate prayer tablets to receive the blessings of the gods. Before covid shutdowns, this process was relatively straightforward since a person would watch while the temple staff inscribed their name and then hung the tablet on the wall. However, once everyone was in quarantine these practices were shifted to the app WeChat. The temple had an account on the app where people who wanted their wishes granted could pay and see their tablet inscribed and hung up on the wall. Over course of the pandemic, this process of online wish fulfillment only became more and more popular.

Because of its increased online presence, since the pandemic started, internal data of the City God Temple shows that 70% of online users are under the age of fifty, compared to pre-pandemic numbers that showed that many people involved in church activities were middle-aged or elderly.<sup>32</sup> Even though this seems like a good thing, some Daoist priests are not so sure. One of the City God Temple's priests believed that the physical relationship between believers and temples is being eroded and thinks that this is not conducive to the development of Daoist temples or Daoism as a whole. The City God Temple of Shanghai has also been lucky to have successful online services, as many other temples cannot brag about the same results. As a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, the Daoist temples have been given a new and pressing challenge. While temples have found alternatives to in person practice, they have all realized that there is no true substitute.

Daoism has come a long way since its creation some 2,000 years ago. Daoism became popular in China in the sixth century BCE due to political unrest because of the Daoist ideas of

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<sup>32</sup> Tone, Sixth. "Post-COVID, China's Taoist Temples Are Still Finding Their Way." #SixthTone, March 13, 2023. <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1012413>.

harmony. Daoism emphasized a person's relationship with the natural world, the importance of nonaction and emptiness, and connection with the Dao. These principles were important to the growing popularity of the religion, but they are still relevant today and can be seen represented by current Daoist practices and within greater Chinese culture. Although Daoism faced obstacles to its practice through the years including dynasties favoring other religions, the effects of communism, and the COVID-19 epidemic, it continues to exert its influence in China.

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