Taoism

Tao means "way", "path" or "principle" and denotes something that is both the source and the driving force behind everything that exists. Symbolized by the Yin and Yang

Origins

Taoism does not fall under an umbrella or a definition of a single organized religion like the Abrahamic traditions; nor can it be studied as the originator or a variant of Chinese folk religion, as although the two share some similar concepts, much of Chinese folk religion is outside of the tenets and core teachings of Taoism. It has consisted of a combination of teachings based on a variety of original revelations.

Lao Tzu is traditionally regarded as the founder of Taoism. Whether he actually existed is commonly disputed; however, the work attributed to him – the Tao-te-Ching (Way of Power [te]) dated to the late 4th century BC.

Essence of this work is pure simplicity: Accept what is without wanting to change it. Study the natural order and go with is, rather than against it. Everything should simulate the flow of nature.

Taoism draws its cosmological foundations from the School of Yin-Yang (in form of its main elements – yin and yang and the Five Phases), which developed during the Warring States period (4th to 3rd centuries BC).

After Lao Tzu and Chuang-tzu the literature of Taoism grew steadily and used to be compiled in form of a canon – the Tao-de Ching. Throughout Chinese history, Taoism was several times nominated as state religion. After the 17th century, however, it fell much from favor. Like all other religious activity,

Taoism was suppressed in the first decades of the People's Republic of China (and even persecuted during the Cultural Revolution), but continued to be practiced in Taiwan. Today, it is one of five religions recognized in the PRC,

Taoism has had profound influence on Chinese culture in the course of the centuries, and clerics of institutionalized Taoism usually take care to note...
distinction between their ritual tradition and the customs and practices found in Chinese folk religion as these distinctions sometimes appear blurred. Chinese alchemy, Chinese astrology, Zen Buddhism, several martial arts,

Traditional Chinese medicine, feng shui, and many styles of qigong have been intertwined with Taoism throughout history. Beyond China, Taoism also had influence on surrounding societies in Asia.

**Writings**

The *Tao Te Ching* or *Daodejing*, is widely regarded to be the most influential Taoist text. According to legend, it was written by Lao Tzu. However, authorship, precise date of origin, and even unity of the text are still subject of debate. The earliest texts of the *Tao Te Ching* that have been excavated - the bamboo slips - date back to the late 4th century BC. Throughout the history of religious Taoism, the *Tao Te Ching* has been used as a ritual text.

*The Tao Te Ching* is not thematically ordered. However, the main themes of the text are repeatedly expressed using variant formulations, often with only a slight difference. The leading themes revolve around the nature of Tao and how to attain it. Tao is said to be ineffable and accomplishes great things through small means.

Ancient commentaries on the *Tao Te Ching* are important texts in their own right. Perhaps the oldest one, the Heshang Gong commentary, was most likely written in the 2nd century CE. Other important commentaries include the one from Wang Bi and the Xiang’er.

The *Tao Te Ching* is also referred to as the Taoist canon. It was originally compiled during the Jin, Tang, and Song dynasties. The version surviving today was published during the Ming Dynasty and includes almost 1500 texts.

The Shangqing school has a tradition of approaching Taoism through scriptural study. It is believed that by reciting certain texts often enough one will be rewarded with immortality.

While the *Tao Te Ching* is most famous, there are many other important texts in traditional Taoism including "Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution" which discusses sin and ethics, and a popular morality tract in the last few centuries. It asserts that those in harmony with Tao will live long and fruitful lives. The wicked, and their descendants, will suffer and have shortened lives.

**Teachings**

Taoist propriety and ethics may vary depending on the particular school, but in general tends to emphasize *wu-wei* - action through non-action i.e., "naturalness", simplicity, spontaneity, and the Three Treasures: *compassion*, *moderation*, and *humility*.

Human beings are seen as a microcosm of the universe, and for example comprise the Five Elements in form of the zang-fu organs. It is believed that deeper understanding of the universe can be achieved by understanding oneself.
Traditionally, it is divided into two categories: Philosophical and Religious

*Philosophical Taoism* is individualistic by nature, is not institutionalized. Institutionalized forms, however, evolved over time in the shape of a number of different schools, often integrating beliefs and practices that even pre-dated the keystone texts – as, for example, the theories of the School of Naturalists, which synthesized the concepts of yin-yang and the Five Elements.

Chang Tzu emphasized naturalness, spontaneity, simplicity, detachment from desires, and most important of all, *wu wei*.

*Religious Taoism* traditionally features reverence for Lao Tzu, immortals or ancestors, along with a variety of divination and exorcism rituals, and practices for achieving ecstasy, longevity or immortality. Taoist beliefs include teachings based on revelations from various sources. Different branches of Taoism often have differing beliefs, especially concerning deities and the proper composition of the pantheon. Nevertheless, there are certain core beliefs that nearly all the sects share.

**Practices**

The Three Treasures or Three Jewels are basic virtues in Taoism (*Compassion, Moderation, and Humility*). They can also be associated with political forms of "abstention from aggressive war and capital punishment", "absolute simplicity of living", and "refusal to assert active authority".

A recurrent and important element of Taoism are rituals, exercises and taking of substances to align oneself spiritually with cosmic forces, so to experience ecstatic spiritual journeys or improve physical health and thereby extending one’s life, ideally to the point of immortality. Probably the most characteristic among these methods is Taoist alchemy. Already in very early Taoist scriptures alchemical formulas were taught for achieving immortality.

A number of martial arts traditions, embody Taoist principles to a significant extent, and some practitioners consider their art to be a means of practicing Taoism.

**Symbols and images**

The yin and yang make an "S" shape, with yin (Black or Red) on the right. One is likely to see this symbol as decorations on Taoist organization flags and logos, temple floors, or stitched into clerical robes. According to Song Dynasty sources, it originated around the 10th century. Previously, yin and yang were symbolized by a tiger and dragon.

Taoist temples may fly square or triangular flags. They typically feature mystical writing or diagrams and are intended to fulfill various functions including providing guidance for the spirits of the dead, to bring good fortune, increase life span, etc. Other flags and banners may be those of the gods or immortals themselves.
Aspects of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism were consciously synthesized in the Neo-Confucian school, which eventually became Imperial orthodoxy for state bureaucratic purposes under the Ming (1368–1644). The Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), however, much favored Confucian classics over Taoist works. During the 18th century, the imperial library was constituted, but excluded virtually all Taoist books.

Ideological and political rivals for centuries, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism deeply influenced one another.[

Today, Taoism is one of five religions recognized by the People's Republic of China. The government regulates its activities through the Chinese Taoist Association. Taoism is freely practiced in Taiwan, where it claims millions of adherents.

Taoist share four major Chinese festivals: Spring Festival or Chinese New Year, Dragon Boat Festival, celebrated in June, the Hungry Ghost festival the day souls from the dead are released from hell, and Mid-Autumn festival or Moon festival, celebrating family and families uniting to emulate the round shape of the moon.

At the Hungry Ghost festival certain foods may be set out as a sacrifice to the spirits of the deceased or the gods. This may include slaughtered animals, such as pigs and ducks, or fruit. Another form of sacrifice involves the burning of Joss paper, or Hell Bank Notes, on the assumption that images thus consumed by the fire will reappear—not as a mere image, but as the actual item—in the spirit world, making them available for revered ancestors and departed loved ones. At other points, a vegan diet or full fast may be observed.

The other festivals are marked by street parades. These are lively affairs which invariably involve firecrackers and flower-covered floats broadcasting traditional music. They also variously include lion dances and dragon dances; humans who occupy the costumes are not considered performers, but rather possessed by the gods and spirits in question.

Sources

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