

The Taoist Tradition: A Historical Outline

THE HISTORY OF TAOISM

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I. THE TEXTS OF "CLASSICAL TAOISM"

There were actually no "Taoists" per se in "classical China" (i.e., before the Ch'in/Han unification, ca. 200 BCE). (It was not until early medieval times—ca. 500 CE—that anyone in China began to identify themselves as "Taoists" to distinguish their traditions and practices from those of Confucians or Buddhists.) But by early Han times, historians trying to "make sense" of the plethora of writings and ideas from classical times coined a label (tao-chia) and applied it to some of the ancient materials; a variety of such writings, and the ideas in them, were thus artificially and retroactively identified as "taoist," despite the fact that their original authors were a diverse lot and never regarded themselves (or each other) as members of any "school" or "group." Once Taoism per se developed, much later, the Taoists who put together their "canon" (i.e., their corpus of important texts) decided to include a variety of texts from classical times; they did so partly because they found inspiration in those texts, but mostly because such texts could be used to show how ancient and noble their tradition actually was. In Han times, the imperial government divinized "Lao-tzu" (a fictitious classical "author"), stimulating a late-Han belief that "Lord Lao" mandated certain new religious movements. Hence, later Taoists often recognized Lord Lao as the

originator of their tradition, while identifying other historical personages as more proximate “founders.”

In modern culture, it is widely believed that the core of “classical Taoism” was a certain set of ideas. In reality, the classical roots of Taoism lay in the practices of unknown men and women who tried to refine and transform themselves to attain full integration with life’s deepest realities. Eventually, around the 4th-century BCE, some of them anonymously wrote about such practices, urging others to engage in them, thereby solving life’s problems. In time, such self-cultivation practices were even marketed as a solution to social and political problems. In modern times, non-Taoists around the world have enjoyed such ideas, and have re-interpreted such texts as Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu as offering ideal solutions to modern problems. However, in doing so they have often done violence to the authentic messages of the ancient texts, and have neglected the ways that those messages were preserved by centuries of living Taoists of China, men and women who continue to engage in holistic self-cultivation. Today’s scholars debate the dating, contents, and significance of the classical texts associated with Taoism. The most important are the following:

1. The Nei-yeh (mid 4th century BCE)

The brief and long-overlooked Nei yeh (“Inner Cultivation”; preserved in the Kuan-tzu) teaches how to internalize spiritual forces—ch’i (“life-energy”), ching (“vital essence”), and shen (“spiritual consciousness”) — through meditative quiescence and purification. To balance and quiet his/her hsin (“heart/mind”), the practitioner builds up his/her te (“proficiency at obtaining” such energies) by practicing daily self-control over thought, emotion, and action. Such practices deeply influenced later Taoism, especially the Ch’üan-chen practices of late-imperial and modern times.

Differences from Chuang-tzu and Lao-tzu/Tao te ching: The Nei-yeh undermines many common misconceptions about classical Taoist teachings. It includes no attacks on Confucianism or other classical schools; no idealization of “simpler times”; no critique of language (as engendering misconceptions of reality); no questioning the capacity of the human mind to comprehend reality; no attack on “conventional”

views; no argument that life is an unrelenting process of change; no advice for warriors or rulers; no idealization of "feminine" behaviors; no exhortation to practice wu-wei ("non-action"); no altruistic moral teachings; no concept of "the Dao" as mother; and no cosmological ruminations on "being" / "non-being."

2. The Chuang-tzu (late 4th century BCE, and later material)

A collection of "stories with a point," often in the form of imaginary conversations. Originally 52 chapters; cut down to 33 by Kuo Hsiang (3rd-century CE), who only kept what made sense to him. Chapters 1-7 are generally believed to have originated in writings of Chuang Chou (ca. 370-300 BCE); other chapters are by later writers who had somewhat different ideas. The full text was not completed until ca. 130 BCE.

Contents:

- Raises doubt about common humanistic assumptions and "common-sense" ideas
- Raises doubt about the efficacy of rational thought as a reliable guide to truth
- Raises doubt about boundaries between life/death, human/non-human
- Urges a revolutionized perception of reality, but gives no directions for attaining it
- "Tao": the reality of things as they truly are; not a guiding force or cosmic principle
- Human Ideal: various terms, e.g. the "True Person" (chen-jen)
- No clear bio-spiritual practices; no ethical or political teachings; no idealization of "feminine" behaviors; no concept of "the Dao" as mother; no exhortation to practice wu-wei.

The Tao te ching ["Lao-tzu"] (compiled ca. 300 BCE; some contents older)

Origins:

- “real-life wisdom” from anonymous people (not intellectuals) of 6th–4th centuries BCE, probably
- the local elders ("lao-tzu") of the southern land of Ch'u, possibly including women;
- teachings about bio-spiritual practices and ambient spiritual realities influenced by the tradition
- that produced the Nei-yeh.
- Transmitted orally for generations, shifting and expanding in content; committed to writing ca. 300 BCE by an unknown intellectual, who converted the material into a socio-political program to compete with the programs of Confucians, etc., among the intellectual elite in the political centers of Chou lands. Eventually the fact that it went back to teachings of “the elders” was forgotten, and “lao-tzu” was assumed to be the name of a character called "Lao-tzu."

Contents:

- Early Layers: Emphasis on personal simplicity, self-restraint, and "feminine" behaviors
- “Tao”: The source and natural principle of things, likened to a universal Mother
- Ethics: One should act selflessly, thereby benefitting self and others alike
Later Layers: Emphasis on sagely government; rejection of Confucian moralism
- Human Ideal: The "Sage" (sheng-jen)—one whose behavior is like that of Tao

Editions:

- Wang Pi: “the received text” on which most translations have been based; assumed to be the work of Wang Pi (226–249), though his commentary reflects a different edition.
- The Ma-wang-tui Texts: two incomplete editions of early Han date (ca. 200 BCE) discovered by Chinese archaeologists in the 1970s; main differences from the “received text”: (a) minor wording differences; (b) chapters 38–81 come before chapters 1–37.
- The Kuo-tien (Guodian) Text: discovered in a Ch'u site by archaeologists in 1993; consists of fragments corresponding to

passages of chapters 1–66; datable to ca. 300 BCE; lacks attacks on Confucian values.

3. Other "Classical Taoist" Texts:

i. Huai-nan-tzu:

A collective work from the court of Liu An, King of Huai-nan, 139 BCE; a comprehensive explanation of all of life; applies cosmic principles to problems of government.

ii. Lieh-tzu:

Purportedly pre-Han, but really by Chang Chan, 4th-century CE; uses material from Chuang-tzu, but with a twist: here, one is urged to live life authentically because death is inevitable; intended to divorce the "cultivation of life" (yang-sheng) from the goal of transcending mortal life.

II. "LATER TAOISM"

Taoism never became an "organized religion" in the sense of having any centralized authority that attempted to maintain orthodoxy or orthopraxy. It was always diverse and fluid, with no clear boundaries. New traditions constantly sprang up, and interwove themselves with older traditions. The following outline shows how scholars at the opening of the 21st-century conceptualize the phases and segments of Taoism, based on historical and textual research, and on categories sometimes used by Taoists themselves.

"The Early Taoist Movement"

Roots:

- The Mohist model of a systematically organized religious movement under an authority figure who

claimed that his authority was ordained by Heaven.

- Various social, political, and religious currents of Han times, including:

prognostic and prophetic texts (ch'en-wei) created/circulated by court advisors called fang-shih,

whose expertise involved matters beyond the pale of ordinary civilian or technical officials

imperial divinization of Lao-tzu as “Lord Lao” (Lao-chün)

- Note: Many modern scholars assert that Taoism had roots in “shamanism,” uncritically misusing that term as though it meant “any plebian religious activity involving interactions with spiritual beings.” Actually, a “shaman” is nothing of the sort, and there is no trace of any shamanic practice in classical Taoist texts.

Primary Text: The T'ai-p'ing ching ["Scripture of Grand Tranquility"] (2nd-century CE with later additions).

A compendium of religious ideas of diverse provenance, circulating at the Han court. Key teaching: Heaven is sending a "Celestial Master" (t'ien-shih) to rectify the human world. Many elements of later Taoism (including meditational practices) are found in the T'ai-p'ing ching to some degree.

The T'IEN-SHIH ("Celestial Master") Movement (2nd-7th centuries)

- Founder: Chang Tao-ling (origins unknown): claimed have received a Covenant (meng-wei) from Lao-chün in 142; and claimed to be the "Celestial Master" promised in the T'ai-p'ing ching.
- Focus: Liturgical; sacerdotal; ecclesiastical. The only segment of the Taoist tradition that functioned rather like a “church.” Ordained officials (male and female) supervised their plebian followers’ religious lives: they taught how to obtain relief from illness and absolution from inherited sins through

- confession and good works; they also conducted liturgical ceremonies in the form of official petitions to various unseen powers (generally understood as officials in the higher dimensions). The organization of the movement was very systematic and hierarchical, down to the laity: all members received graded "registers" (lu) associated with specific spiritual forces, and renounced the worship of any unapproved spirits.
- **Sense of Identity:** The movement conceived itself as a religious orthodoxy, with a leadership ordained by heavenly powers. It opposed all other religious activities in which commoners of those days engaged, stigmatizing them as "cults." But other than claiming an authority from the Covenant from Lord Lao, it claimed no relationship to any of the pre-Han figures, texts, or ideas that we identify as "classical Taoism"; and did not conceive itself as opposed to Confucian traditions.
 - **Social Reality:** The only Taoist tradition that was truly based among "the masses." Social status was ignored: leaders came from among the common people (not the aristocracy), and the priesthood was open to women and non-Chinese. The T'ien-shih movement neither opposed nor supported established government: its leaders regarded themselves as spiritual rulers with a mandate to lead society in place of the weakening Han emperors. The movement's leadership was hereditary, but had little standing outside the movement.
 - **Teachings:** Little intellectualization. Spiritual practice was understood in terms of moral rectification and establishment of a proper relationship with the ruling forces of the unseen world. Little trace of individual self-elevation in other terms.
 - **History:** In 215 CE the movement aligned itself with the government of new Wei dynasty; it remained aligned with the subsequent Chin rulers until North China fell to invaders in 316 CE. After the Chin rulers fled south, the T'ien-shih movement lost its social base in most regions. It endured only in vestigial forms: its ideas and practices were preserved in very limited circles in both north (see "Lou-kuan Taoism") and south. Those ideas and practices served as a springboard for many of the new developments in Taoism until Sung times. However, the hereditary leadership within the Chang clan died out by the 7th

century. By the 11th century, a family of the same name based on Mt. Lung-hu began posing as heirs and successors of the "Celestial Masters" described here; that claim was accepted by virtually everyone in later China, and by modern scholars, though research has shown it to be baseless, like the fictitious Lung-men lineage.

"Aristocratic Taoism" (6th century - 10th century)

Roots

- "The Old Traditions of Chiang-nan" (i.e., South China before the early 4th-century Chin influx)
- Interest in literary stories about beings called "transcendents" (hsien; often mistranslated "immortals")
- Interest in a goddess called "the Queen Mother of the West" (Hsi Wang Mu)
- Southern patricians' need for spiritual status, reacting to the claims of the T'ien-shih leaders who
- Came south with the Chin rulers after 312. These aristocrats were willing to perpetuate and
- Assimilate certain elements from the T'ien-shih traditions (somewhat as early gentile Christians
- Adapted certain earlier Hebraic elements). But the southern aristocrats asserted their own
- Standing by articulating new models for personal self-cultivation (something never present in
- The T'ien-shih tradition) and claiming (a) that those models had been revealed by beings from
- Dimensions higher than those who had authorized any earlier tradition, and (b) that those new
- Models allow the individual practitioner to attain the spiritual status of such higher beings.

"The Old Traditions of Chiang-nan" (? - 4th century)

Roots:

Old southern traditions of bio-spiritual self-development and talismanic ritual. No founder or

known historical leaders. No sense of group identity. Social reality and specific teachings poorly known.

Primary Texts:

San-huang wen ["Text of the Three Sovereigns"]: methods of invoking spirits

Wu-fu ching ["Scripture of the Five Talismans"]: talismanic magic

“T'ai-ch'ing Taoism” (2nd-7th centuries)

A term used in Ko Hung's Pao-p'u-tzu for texts about “operative alchemy” (wai-tan)—a pursuit of personal perfection through a transformative process expressed in chemical terms; to be distinguished from the later meditational systems generally called “inner alchemy” (nei-tan). Ko says that such texts were brought south from Shantung at the end of the second century. Surviving T'ai-ch'ing texts teach a sequence of practices: transmission from master to disciple; establishment of a sacred ritual area and selection of an auspicious time; compounding of an efficacious substance (tan, “elixir,” symbolized as cinnabar, not gold) that would elevate the practitioner to a heavenly sphere called T'ai-ch'ing (“Great Clarity”); an offering to the deities; and ingestion of the tan. It is not known how many people of what social background may have actually engaged in such practices. New forms of “alchemy” appeared somewhat later.

A Gentleman's Methods for Attaining Immortality: Ko Hung's Pao-p'u-tzu

A writing often associated with all of the aforementioned southern tradition is the Pao-p'u-tzu ["(The Writings of) the Master who Embraces Simplicity"]: the writings of Ko Hung, a 4th-century southerner who claimed to have inherited special spiritual methods from

his great-uncle, Ko Hsüan. Ko Hung was intent to demonstrate (a) that such methods could elevate a person to a deathless state, like what the hsien enjoy, and (b) that such a pursuit of immortality was a fitting goal for upstanding gentlemen (i.e., for Confucians). Ko is thus best characterized as a maverick Confucian who sought to integrate various teachings about spiritual practices into the elite culture of his society. But he did not identify himself with the teachings found in the classical Taoist texts, and had no use for the T'ien-shih Taoists. Later Taoists nonetheless claimed him as a significant figure within their heritage.

The Great Revelations: Shang-ch'ing and Ling-pao (4th-5th centuries)

Common Characteristics:

- Arose in same historical setting (South China), primarily among aristocrats
- Were based upon revelations to chosen individuals from celestial beings
- Venerated texts revealed by those celestial beings
- Transmitted teachings secretly from master to initiate
- Required religious activity to effect the spiritual goal.

The Shang-ch'ing Tradition

- Arose in South among former followers of the "Celestial Master" tradition; flourished into T'ang times.
- Revealed Texts: (a) scriptures; (b) biographies of the "Perfected Ones"; (c) oral instructions.
- Doctrine and Praxis: The "Perfected Ones" (chen-jen—one of Chuang-tzu's terms for an ideal person) reside (1) in the heavens (one of which is called Shang-ch'ing, "Supreme Clarity"); (2) in underground grottoes; and (3) in the microcosm of the individual. The practitioner's goal is ascent to Perfection, defined as the transcendent state enjoyed by the Perfected Ones.
- Eschatology: Soon the world as we know it will end, and "the Sage of the Later Age" (hou-sheng) will arrive to save those who are prepared for heavenly ascent. This "messianic" expectation, likely derived from the Han-dynasty prognostic tradition, was

- not shared by any other form of “aristocratic Taoism.” It endured into early T’ang times, then dissipated.
- **Methods of Self-Perfection:** The characteristic Shang-ch’ing practice was meditative visualization of, and communion with, the Perfected Ones. A rarer and more perilous practice (though said by the chen-jen to be inferior to their meditative practices) was wai-tan, “operative alchemy,” inherited from the older traditions mentioned above. The discipline and spiritual focus involved in the laborious manufacture of an elixir was one method of elevating a practitioner’s spiritual state for eventual ascent. However, ingesting a formula that had been prepared without adequate spiritual and ritual safeguards could result in death without the intended spiritual ascent, so few were allowed to practice alchemy, and all such undertakings were rigorously controlled by knowledgeable masters. Still, anyone desiring to ascend to the heavens necessarily had to forego life on the earthly plane, so wai-tan inherently involved physical death, in the expectation of creating a perfected self that would no longer be mortal.

The Ling-pao Tradition

Roots:

- "the Old Traditions of Chiang-nan"
- the Shang-ch’ing revelations
- Mahâyâna Buddhism

Founder: Ko Ch’ao-fu (fl. late 4th century)

Primary Text: The (Ling-pao) Tu-jen ching ["Scripture for the Salvation of Humanity"]

Doctrine and Praxis: A supreme deity (Yüan-shih t’ien-tsun) has existed since the beginning of the world, and constantly seeks to save humanity. He sends an emissary to reveal the Tu-jen ching, which is an emanation of the Tao itself. The adept recites the text, re-actualizing its primordial recitation by the deity and thus participating in its salvific efficacy. Some Ling-pao writings display clear influence of Buddhist

ideas, making it the only segment of medieval Taoism that was directly stimulated by Buddhism.

“The Northern Celestial Masters” (4th–6th centuries)

A term used by some scholars for the Taoist traditions of North China after the migration of the “Celestial Masters” in the early 4th-century and the end of K’ou Ch’ien-chih’s efforts in the mid 4th-century. Foremost among those traditions was that based at the abbey called Lou-kuan (Louguan) southwest of the capital, Ch’ang-an. Since the abbey was built near where “Lao-tzu” was said to have “departed to the West,” many Lou-kuan texts feature teachings by and about “Lord Lao,” identified as a divine being who descends to earth from age to age in order to reveal salvific teachings. One such teaching is found in the Hsi-sheng ching (“Scripture of Western Ascension”). Lou-kuan masters also initiated northern rulers into holy orders; participated in imperially staged debates with Buddhists; and compiled a variety of texts, including catalogs and “Taoist encyclopedias” such as the Wu-shang pi-yao.

G. Cosmological Alchemy (5th–8th centuries)

Quite separate from the earlier wai-tan tradition called T’ai-ch’ing was a tradition of symbolic alchemy based on an undated text of late antiquity, the Chou-i ts’an-t’ung ch’i (“Tally for Threefold Integration in terms of the I ching”). The I ching (Book of Change) originated during the early Chou dynasty (i.e., ca. 1000 BCE). It is essentially a textual oracle—a system that allows people to tap into the fundamental realities of life. One of its early commentaries (the Shuo-kua) states that the I ching was created by ancient sages who observed the processes that operate in the world and discovered underlying principles, by which one can understand why certain activities lead to success and others lead to failure. Though older than either Confucianism or Taoism, the validity and value of the I ching were accepted by most Confucians and Taoists throughout history, though few ever regarded it as central to their tradition.

The main exception within Taoism was the Chou-i ts’an-t’ung ch’i, attributed to a legendary figure named Wei Po-yang. Since the I ching allows us to peer into the processes that operate in the changing world,

and to discover how to bring our activities into alignment with those processes, it is easy to see how it could inspire a systematic study and application of its principles. Texts like the Chou-i ts'an-t'ung ch'i were considered divine revelations which, when supplemented by proper oral instruction, provided the secret keys that allowed the practitioner to manipulate cosmic forces in such a way as to achieve a transcendent state, assimilated to eternal realities beyond the world of change. That process could be understood either as an external (wai), material process of compounding an ingestible "elixir," or as an inner (nei) process of spiritual transformation or "refinement." Both those understandings are evidenced in texts from T'ang times; thereafter, "external alchemy" faded away, but its terminology provided symbolic concepts that endured in the "Inner Alchemy" traditions of Late-imperial Taoism.

"TAO-CHIAO"

The Ecumenical Tradition

(6th century - 12th century)

A clear sense of common "Taoist identity" evolved in South China during the Liu-Sung Dynasty of the 5th century. By that time, Buddhism had become a powerful force in both the North and the South (especially after the corpus of Kumârajîva's translations stimulated interest in Mahâyâna Buddhism). In order to compete with Mahâyâna Buddhism, some members of the Taoist movements of the day began trying to organize their traditions into a coherent whole. They assembled a corpus of scriptures (San-tung, "The Three Arcana"), which included works of Ling-pao, Shang-ch'ing, and the old traditions of Chiang-nan. Later, four supplementary sections were added, containing texts pertaining to the Tao te ching, the T'ai-p'ing ching, the T'ai-ch'ing tradition, and the T'ien-shih tradition. A leading figure in such efforts was the Ling-pao master Lu Hsiu-ching (406-477), who drew upon earlier ritual traditions to establish new liturgical forms (chiao and chai), adding elements of both imperial ritual and popular worship. Under Ling-pao auspices, Taoism became an ecumenical, non-sectarian tradition, in which any (non-Buddhist) text or group devoted to higher spiritual goals found a

place. The Ling-pao synthesis became a social and cultural bridge, blending compatible Buddhist concepts and values with more traditional Taoist forms in such a way that intellectuals, mystics, and pious peasants could all participate in a single comprehensive religious system, which its participants called Tao-chiao ("the Teaching of the Tao," a tradition intended to be comparable to, and competitive with, Fo-chiao, "the Teaching of the Buddha," and Ju-chiao, "the Teaching of the Confucians"). Eventually, the leadership of the tradition was assumed by masters ordained in the Shang-ch'ing tradition, such as T'ao Hung-ching (456-536). Taoists of the subsequent T'ang period generally traced their authority back to T'ao (not to earlier figures like Chang Tao-ling).

During most of the medieval period (i.e., the late "Six Dynasties," T'ang, and Northern Sung dynasties), Taoism frequently maintained close ties to the government and to the social/cultural elite. The T'ang emperors claimed descent from Lao-tzu, and continued the tradition of linking the government to Taoism for legitimacy support that had evolved in the north during the "Six Dynasties." All the T'ang emperors (especially Hsüan-tsung, r. 712-755) heavily patronized Taoism. But though imperial support for Taoist institutions was strong, the rulers generally tried to maintain control of all religious organizations. In T'ang times, aristocratic leaders like Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen (646-735) wrote new texts on meditation and personal refinement, and associated freely with political and cultural leaders. They thus greatly influenced contemporary literature and politics as well as religion. Abbeys (kuan), first established in the 7th century, were staffed by celibate priests/priestesses (tao-shih); they performed liturgical rituals (the chiao and chai) designed to integrate society and cosmos. But self-cultivation remained central, and Ssu-ma wrote texts like the Fu-ch'i ching-i lun ("On the Essential Meaning of the Absorption of Ch'i-Energy"); and the Tso-wang lun ("On 'Sitting in Forgetfulness'"; also called "Seven Steps to the Tao"). He also edited the T'ien-yin tzu ("The Master of Heavenly Seclusion"), arguing that the path of spiritual transcendence (shen-hsien) requires practice of "various techniques to cultivate and refine body and energy, to nourish and harmonize mind and emptiness" (Kohn). Some of Ssu-ma's writings show acceptance of certain Buddhist ideas, as do other little-known T'ang texts like the Tao-chiao i-shu ("Pivotal Meaning of

the Taoist Teaching”) and the Pen-chi ching (“Scripture of the Genesis Point”), both of which teach that all things contain a “pure, empty and spontaneous Tao-nature (Tao-hsing),” a concept presumably inspired by the Buddhist concept of a universal “Buddha-nature.” In late T’ang times, new traditions, like “Inner Alchemy,” began to evolve, and new movements, like Ch’ing-wei, were founded. In the final days of the T’ang, and the generation that followed, much of the foregoing Taoist heritage was chronicled in the numerous compilations of a historian named Tu Kuang-t’ing (850–933).

TAOISM UNDER SIEGE: "LATE IMPERIAL TAOISM"

(10th century – present)

In “Late Imperial” times—from late T’ang times through the Sung (960–1279), Yüan (1279–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Ch’ing (1644–1911)—Taoism evolved in new ways, which remain poorly known even by most scholars and historians. Certain trends continued throughout those periods:

- (1) Taoism was constantly re-imagined and re-formulated to suit the needs of people in a changing society;
- (2) Taoism spread more fully into all segments of Chinese society, including the new “gentry”; and
- (3) Taoism was forced to accommodate itself to other traditions (especially Confucianism) by the increasingly oppressive regimes of the Yüan, Ming, and Ch’ing periods.

In the 10th-century, part of north China was annexed into a new nation ruled by a non-Chinese people called Khitan (source of the old name “Cathay”). In 1126, the entire northern half of China was conquered by another people, the Jurchen; the Sung government was re-established in the south, in a much weakened condition, and by 1279 the whole of China was conquered by the Mongols, whose dynasty (Yüan) made Beijing (the

old Khitan capital) the capital of China for the first time. Through the “Northern Sung” (i.e., to 1126), Taoism was still supported by most emperors, and in 1114 the emperor Hui-tsung brought Taoists from across the empire to compile a new collection of all Taoists texts, in part to demonstrate his empire’s spiritual superiority over the “barbarian” states to the north. Among them were not only the Shen-hsiao founder Lin Ling-su but also Ts’ao Wen-i, a woman poet who commentaries on the Tao te ching and Hsi-sheng ching.

But after the fall of the north, Taoism had to survive in a new set of social and political conditions, and by late Sung times, the strong “sense of identity” of medieval Taoists faded. The institutions of medieval Taoists (e.g., the abbeys where tao-shih practiced Taoist ideals) gave way to new social realities: (a) monastic traditions, (b) new vernacular traditions, and (c) ongoing literati traditions re-defined for the new “gentry” class (which replaced the old aristocracy). From Sung times on, Taoism never had the same kind of focus or leadership that it had had in T’ang times. Whereas the T’ang rulers, strong and confident, encouraged and patronized strong Taoist leaders, the weaker rulers of Sung times could not afford to do so; and the alien rulers of the Yüan and Ch’ing periods sometimes shackled Taoism’s leadership. The succeeding dynasties usually “recognized” a single group (often Cheng-i, sometimes Lung-men) as the “official” leaders of Taoism, without regard for what the Taoists of the day believed or practiced. Government domination forced Taoists to abandon all traditions that the rulers would not tolerate, and to develop in new ways.

The new developments included:

(1) creation of a new power-base that could survive suppression, by accepting as “Taoist”:

(a) a variety of new revelations and new movements (see below); and

(b) a variety of non-Taoist local cults.

(2) greater personalization of religious ideals and practices, especially in terms of “Inner Alchemy.”

I. New Traditions of Individual Practice

Chin-tan ("Golden Elixir") Taoism: A system of spiritual refinement through meditation, better known as "Inner Alchemy." Not an organization or social movement, but rather a new approach to the Taoist life, as expressed chiefly by such writers as Chang Po-tuan (11th century; author of Wu-chen p'ien, "On Awakening to Transcendental Reality") and Li Tao-ch'un (13th century; author of Chung-ho chi, "On Centered Harmony," also called "The Book of Balance and Harmony"). In this tradition, based in part on the Ts'an-t'ung ch'i, older practices of physiological refinement are re-interpreted as a more abstract process of purifying the mind; however, the elements of the process are couched, often cryptically, in symbolic language (e.g., as "uniting the dragon and the tiger"). Such presentations were increasingly simplified during Ming and Ch'ing times, e.g., in the Hsing-ming kwei-chih ["Balanced Instructions about Inner Nature and Life-Realities"] of 1615, and in the writings of Taoists like Liu I-ming (1734-1821). Much of this tradition was absorbed into the later Ch'üan-chen tradition, including Lung-men.

II. New Ritual Traditions of Sung Times

Common Characteristics:

- Began before the conquest of the north in 1126
- Survived by providing efficacious practices helpful to the community, especially healing
- Made little use of "inner alchemy," or of earlier traditions of meditative self-cultivation
- Made little use of Confucian or Neo-Confucian ideas or practices
- Unknown today, except for Cheng-i, which survives in Taiwan and southeastern China

1. Ch'ing-wei ("Clarified Tenuity") Taoism: A complex of ritual traditions claimed to go back to a young woman, Tsu Shu (fl. 900). Its "thunder rites" (lei-fa) enabled a priest to internalize the spiritual power of thunder to facilitate meditative union with the Tao, whereupon he/she could perform healings. In the 13th-century, disciples of an official named Huang Shun-shen reworked Ch'ing-wei traditions as part of a comprehensive ritual system that also included elements of the earlier Shang-ch'ing and Ling-pao traditions, along with Tantric Buddhist

forms. A century later, the syncretist Chao I-chen edited the surviving Ch'ing-wei texts, and apparently incorporated them into a comprehensive ritual collection called the Tao-fa hui-yüan, the largest work in today's Taoist canon. Thereafter, Ch'ing-wei had no separate existence.

2. T'ien-hsin ("Heart of Heaven") Taoism: A tradition of ritual healing based upon scriptures discovered in the early Sung period by a retired official, Jao Tung-t'ien, who devised "a ritual system for literati in both local and national society." When Sung Hui-tsung summoned Taoists to the capital to compile a comprehensive canon, the T'ien-hsin material was presented to the Sung court. Its scriptures teach priests how to heal illness by drawing down spiritual power from stars. It influenced several important novels, and is still practiced among some Chinese in Thailand.

3. Shen-hsiao ("Divine Empyrean") Taoism: A liturgical tradition established by Lin Ling-su at the court of the Sung emperor Hui-tsung (early 12th century). Lin expanded the Ling-pao Tu-jen ching and presented Hui-tsung as a divine ruler whose reign would provide salvation to all by sponsoring re-enactments of the original Ling-pao revelation. Shen-hsiao traditions survived as a combination of "salvation through (personal) refinement" (lien-tu) and various therapeutic rituals. In modern China, Cheng-i leaders gave the Shen-hsiao title to some priests, but deemed them inferior.

4. T'ung-ch'u ("Youthful Incipience") Taoism: An obscure tradition of therapeutic rituals founded by a young man in 1121, claiming continuity with the Shang-ch'ing tradition. Its texts were preserved in the the Tao-fa hui-yüan, but the movement had no separate existence after the 13th-century.

5. CHENG-I ("Orthodox Unity") Taoism: The only liturgical tradition surviving today.

This sect, centered at Mt. Lung-hu in south China, flourished under imperial patronage from the 11th to 18th centuries. It is led by hereditary clerics of the Chang clan, who claim (groundlessly, we now know) to be direct descendents of Chang Tao-ling and successors to his "Celestial Master" mandate. In the 11th-13th centuries, this sect was patronized by

the Sung and Yüan emperors, and in the 14th century, the founder of the Ming dynasty gave it formal jurisdiction over all Taoists in the south. To the present day, Cheng-i Taoism is found generally in South China (and among the Chinese of Taiwan, most of whom emigrated from South China). Hence, the modern Cheng-i tradition is sometimes known as "Southern Taoism." As in the old T'ien-shih tradition, Cheng-i leaders from the outset sought to undermine all local cults, and they branded all other forms of Taoism (e.g., Shen-hsiao) as dangerous (i.e., as evil and/or subversive). In the mid-18th century, the Ch'ing court lost interest in them, and early Western references to Cheng-i leaders as Taoist "popes" constituted gross exaggerations. Cheng-i continue to practice, but their authority in modern times has been negligible. Cheng-i priests maintain the old chiao liturgies (harmonizing the local community with the cosmos), and they also serve the public with healing rituals. Unlike the other surviving form of Taoism—the less visible meditative tradition of Ch'üan-chen Taoism—Cheng-i has generally appealed to the public, wherefore Chinese rulers and modern intellectuals came to dismiss "Taoism" as nothing but the worthless superstitions of the ignorant masses. A few Westerners have been ordained as Cheng-i priests. Their writings sometimes exaggerate the importance of the liturgical Cheng-i tradition, and contribute to the misconception that Cheng-i (sometimes derided by modern observers as "popular Taoism") is all that remains of Taoism in modern times.

III. New Self-Cultivation Traditions in “The Conquest States” of North China

Common Characteristics:

- Arose in North China under the conquest regimes—the Jurchens' "Chin" dynasty and the Mongols' "Yüan" dynasty
- Attracted followers from all levels of society
- Disregarded earlier liturgical traditions
- Stressed attainment of "spiritual transcendence" (shen-hsien) through self-cultivation
- Synthesized elements of Confucianism and Buddhism into Taoism
- Stressed dedication to moral ideals, and sometimes healing

- All except Ch'üan–chen lost their separate existence by the 14th century

1. T'ai–i ("Supreme Union") Taoism: Founded by Hsiao Pao–chen in the 12th century, it stressed ritual healing and social responsibility. Though popular among emperors (like Khubilai Khan), the sect's leaders left no writings, and their movement is therefore poorly known.

2. Chen–ta ("Perfected Greatness") or Ta–tao ("Great Way") Taoism: Founded by Liu Te–jen in the 12th– century, it syncretized the basic moral teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, and was patronized by the Chin government. It sought healing through prayer rather than ritual, and stressed the classical Taoist moral values of "yielding," simplicity, humility, and respect for others. Like T'ai–i Taoism, the Chen–ta Taoists left few writings.

3. CH'ÜAN–CHEN ("Integral Perfection") Taoism: The only self–cultivation tradition surviving today.

Ch'üan–chen originated in the teachings of Wang Che (Wang Ch'ung–yang), a 12th–century scholar. Wang taught that immortality can be attained in this life by entering seclusion, cultivating one's internal spiritual realities (hsing), and harmonizing them with one's external life (ming). His seven famous disciples included a woman (Sun Pu–erh) and a man named Ch'iu Ch'u–chi (also known as Ch'iu Ch'ang–ch'un), who was courted by several rulers, including the Mongol general Chinggis Khan. The tradition soon adopted a monastic setting, and its teachings became a spiritualized re–interpretation of the older Taoist practices known as Chin–tan ("Golden Elixir") or "Inner Alchemy." Ch'üan–chen Taoism paralleled—and interacted with—the meditative traditions of Ch'an Buddhism and Neo–Confucianism: all three stress individual moral and spiritual discipline rather than a philosophical, scriptural, or ritual focus. Up to forty percent of the early Ch'üan–chen clerics were women, though all Ch'üan–chen texts of Chin and Yüan times had male authors. From late Yüan times onward, fewer women appeared in leadership roles, mostly because of diminishing roles for women in the ambient society.

Ch'üan–chen Taoism endures today, both intellectually and institutionally, though it is largely unknown to Westerners, and has attracted little attention from Western scholars. Since its traditional focus was always in North China, and its headquarters today remains the White Cloud Abbey (Po–yün kuan) in Beijing, Taoists today often call the Ch'üan–chen tradition "Northern Taoism." A few Taoist masters (such as Ni Hua–ching) brought related traditions to America in the late 20th–century and re–interpreted them for an American audience.

IV. Accommodations with Confucianism in Ming Times

Ming Taoists maintained their traditions as best they could, given the rigid strictures imposed by the government. Though Chinese (unlike the previous Mongol rulers and the subsequent Manchu rulers), the Ming emperors imposed a “unifying” vision that reinforced, and justified even further hardening of, the political strictures that had been imposed by the Yüan regime. Late–imperial China was not “modern” in any Western sense: it had nothing comparable to Western capitalism, individualism, democracy, or even Marxism: political authority in late–imperial China had nothing to do with the consent of the governed, and no one was free to speak or act in ways that might (even theoretically) effect socio–political change. The Mongols had put the Chinese people on “a reservation” in their own land, and nothing changed under the Ming or Ch'ing regimes. Both Buddhists and Taoists realized the necessity to avoid controversy, to find “safe” ways to explain and practice their traditions. So if Taoists wished to survive, they had to (1) accept a role as puppets of the throne, doing nothing but what they were told, or (2) camouflage their teachings and practices in innocuous garb, practicing and teaching in ways that seemed to have no socio–political significance. Thus, a tradition that had been central to imperial power structures for a millennium was forced either to confess irrelevancy or to cater obsequiously to imperial whims. Such thoroughgoing intimidation of Taoism persisted into the modern period, and became even worse under Communist rule, especially during the “Cultural Revolution” of 1966–1976.

In 1374, the founder of the Ming dynasty praised Cheng-i Taoism for its focus on local mores, and disparaged Ch'an Buddhism and Ch'üan-chen Taoism for "devoting themselves to the cultivation of the person and the improvement of the individual endowment." Since tyrants always denounce individualism and praise obsequious conformity to established social patterns, it is no wonder that six-hundred years later such ideological pronouncements continued to color the minds of all Chinese men who sought social and cultural advancement, as well as the minds of their Western students, throughout the 20th-century.

Ching-ming ("Pure Illumination") Taoism:

Origins associated with a Six-Dynasties official, Hsü Sun, who reportedly used ritual powers to save people from disasters in the southeast, and became the focus of an enduring local cult. According to the T'ang chronicler Tu Kuang-t'ing, a local tradition arose there, called the Chung-hsiao tao ("Way of Loyalty and Filiality," two Confucian virtues), also called Ching-ming ("Pure Illumination"). In 1131, Hsü reportedly revealed a set of talismanic rituals, ethical teachings, and instructions on self-cultivation to the local cult's leader Ho Chen-kung. A century later, a Shen-hsiao leader named Po Yü-ch'an (Pai Yü-ch'an) promoted it along with other location traditions. Then in early Yüan times, Liu Yü (1257-1308) reformulated the movement, teaching that ritual practices were needed to stimulate the virtues of loyalty and filiality, which were necessary for stilling the heart/mind—self-cultivation ideals that went back to the classical Nei-yeh. The movement absorbed the T'ai-i and Chen-ta traditions, and was embraced by leading Confucian literati of the Yüan and Ming periods, including Kao P'an-lung (1562-1626) who advocated meditation practices. The local cult survived into the 20th-century, alongside teachings that appealed to literati and coincided with government interests in maintaining Confucian values among the populace. Literati participation continued in Ch'ing times, as seen in the writings of Fu Chin-ch'üan (b. 1765), including texts on Inner Alchemy for women. Ching-ming teachings were absorbed into the modern Lung-men tradition.

V. Survivals: Through the Ch'ing Dynasty into the 20th-Century

The Manchus, who took over China in 1644, maintained Ming policies of strict government control of religion, exacerbated by their need to suppress their much-more-numerous Chinese subjects in order to maintain control. To demonstrate resistance, many Chinese literati identified themselves as Ch'üan-chen Taoists, and Taoism thus regained a measure of the prestige that it had enjoyed in earlier times.

Lung-men ("Dragon Gate") Taoism:

At the end of the Ming dynasty, a re-efflorescence of Chin-tan (Inner Alchemy) Taoism occurred in southeast China, spread by disciples of Wu Shou-yang (1552-1641), who claimed to have received "Dragon-Gate" credentials going back to the early Ch'üan-chen leader Ch'iu Ch'u-chi. In 1628, a young Taoist named Wang Ch'ang-yüeh met Chao Fu-yang, who allegedly transmitted such credentials (in a style based on "transmission" in early Ch'an Buddhism, as in the Platform Sutra of Hui-neng) and predicted that Wang would soon establish the "Dragon-Gate" tradition at the White Cloud Abbey (Po-yün kuan) in Beijing, which he did in 1656. Wang established a form of Taoism that would flourish into modern times, by integrating an imperially approved set of Confucian ethical teachings into a well-regulated set of Taoist priestly institutions based upon T'ang-dynasty precedents. He thus gave Inner Alchemy practices an institutional basis that passed government muster, and gave both men and women a structured system in which to practice Taoist self-cultivation. For legitimacy, Lung-men Taoists fabricated a Ch'an-like "lineage" going back to Ch'iu Ch'u-chi, and claimed to maintain the Ch'üan-chen legacy. Literati like Liu I-ming (1734-1821) simplified "Inner Alchemy," removing its esoteric symbolism to make it more accessible. As a result, Taoist teachings became a part of popular culture, as seen most clearly in several important novels, and in a meditation text called "The Secret of the Golden Flower," which became famous in the 20th-century West. By that time, most Taoist temples in north and south China alike claimed Lung-men affiliation, and the White Cloud Abbey remains the center of Taoism in China today.

Addendum: The Taoist Corpus (Tao-tsang)

Size: 1120 titles in 5,305 volumes.

Contents: All Taoist texts (and texts held in high esteem by Taoists) that were extant in 1445:

- a. Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, Huai-nan-tzu, etc., and numerous commentaries from all periods;
- b. scriptures, biographical texts, ritual texts, etc., from all segments of Later Taoism.

History: Since T'ang times, emperors had commissioned the compilation of a definitive library of Taoist sacred works. The current edition (the Cheng-t'ung Tao-tsang) was completed in 1445. It was preserved in only a few monasteries (such as Beijing's White Cloud Abbey) until it was finally lithographed in 1926. Hence it was little known to either Asian or Western scholars until the 1930's. Relatively little of the material in the Tao-tsang has yet received serious scholarly attention, and very little has yet been translated into any Western language.

Recommended Resources

Little published before 1978 has much value. Detailed, up-to-date summaries of current scholarship on most segments and phases of Taoism can be found in the *Daoism Handbook*, edited by Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000). More specific topics are covered in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, edited by Fabrizio Pregadio (London: Curzon, forthcoming). The only internet sites that provide reliable material on Taoism are Professor James Miller's "Daoist Studies": <http://www.daoiststudies.org>; and Professor Fabrizio Pregadio's "Golden Elixir": <http://helios.unive.it/~dsao/pregadio/index.html>.

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