Taoism

The Emergence of Taoism

Taoism emerged as a diverse movement during China’s Warring States Period (475 BC – 221 BC). The movement agreed that the current chaos was due to the values Confucianism was promoting. They all saw the Tao, not as the ethical, social, and political ways of ancient Chinese civilization, but rather as the way of nature; unadulterated by human customs, societal structures, and values. For the Taoists, Confucianism was the problem, not the solution.

Schools of Taoism

All Taoists drew upon older Chinese religion and advocated a return to the Tao as the way of nature, not of social convention. They differed, though, in their beliefs about what the Tao is and how to live in harmony with it.

The schools of Taoism exemplify the problem of drawing clear boundaries between religious traditions. They differed in their beliefs (Creed), ethics (Code), practices (Cult) and institutional structures, or lack thereof (Community). With caution, Religious Studies scholars identify three somewhat distinct schools of Taoism, with fundamental similarities but different emphases.

Hedonistic Taoism: Rejecting Social Conventions

We saw how troubled times in ancient China led some to leave society and seek truth and happiness in the forests. During the Warring States Period, some in China took a similar track. The earliest Taoists saw society as hopelessly lost. Society involves burdensome obligations to family and others. These, in turn, cause pain and suffering for the individual. Confucian duties and social protocols added fuel to the fire. The first Taoists wanted to return to nature, and so abandoned society, living as hermits in the woods. In these ways they bear similarities to eighteenth-century European Romanticism (Jean Jacques Rousseau) and nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism (Ralph Waldo Emerson).

Because society was corrupt beyond hope, they advocated a rugged individualism, seeking to “save themselves.” Their cardinal values were seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Their name comes from the Greek word Hedone, meaning pleasure. They did not seek only physical pleasure, though, but also mental, emotional, and spiritual pleasure. Their goal was individual happiness, holistically considered. Living alone in nature was “the way.”

Yong Zih summarized their views: "What is life for? What pleasure is there? For beauty and abundance, that is all. For music and sex, that is all."¹

Philosophical & Mystical Taoism

This alternative to Confucianism soon took an intellectual turn. Some developed a complex metaphysical system for understanding and teaching Taoist beliefs. The system incorporated Pre-Axial Chinese ideas like Ji (energy, “Chi”), De (power, “Te”), Yin and Yong, and the five elements. This became the “philosophical” or “mystical” Taoist school, with Zhwong Zhi and Laow Zhi (Lao Tzu) as the most famous representatives.

Zhwong Zhi (300s BC) formalized the attack on Confucian duties and virtues. He vigorously argued that the Tao is exactly the opposite of the manmade and artificial structures of society. Manmade artificial impositions on nature do not help, but rather harm us. “Less is more.” By breaking free of society's numerous false constructs, one can attain peace, happiness, and harmony through unity with Tao.

The Tao is ultimate reality underlying, sustaining, and moving everything. The divine Tao is everywhere, but is seen most clearly in unadulterated nature. Knowledge of, and union with, the Tao is the religious goal.

Philosophical Taoist Techniques

To achieve this goal, the philosophical Taoists advocated self-discipline of body and mind through meditation and yoga. Scholars debate whether these practices developed independently or under the influence of Indian religion. Either way, there are many parallels between Chinese and Indian mysticism. The now popular discipline of Dai Ji (Tai Chi) originated in this context. Through such mystical practices the philosophical Taoists sought a return to the natural state of balance and harmony with nature and the Tao.

Zhong Zhi advocated a sort of meditation in which the mind become silent. Social life floods the mind with ideas and worries, obscuring one’s true nature. Through reflection and meditation, the wise person overcomes the artificial distinction between one’s ego and the rest of reality. Only by shutting off one’s senses and cutting off distractions caused by other people and society, can one realize this. This non-dual unity with the Tao also results in supernatural powers.

Paradoxes in the *Tao Te Ching*

Lao Tzu, the legendary author of the *Tao De Jing* applied philosophical Taoism to politics and leadership. His ideal of passive “acting without acting” formed a stark contrast to the power and coercion of Chinese warring feudal lords. Most people think that hard, active, visible force is true power. That passive “active non-acting” is true power is counterintuitive and paradoxical. The Tao is in lowly, hidden and humble places, not high, prominent, and proud places. The Tao overturns conventional values and expectations. The *Tao De Jing* uses a number of metaphors and symbols to express the paradoxical values of the Tao.

Weakness and Emptiness

One such paradox is that weakness, not strength, is real power. Strength is ultimately self-defeating: “Turning back is how the Tao moves; weakness is the means of the Tao”\(^2\) “Knowing how to yield is called power.”\(^3\)

Another paradox is how emptiness is better than fullness. A building or pot is more useful when empty than filled: “We mold clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that makes the vessel useful. We fashion wood for a house, but it is the emptiness inside that makes it livable”\(^4\)

The Uncarved Block and the Valley

A recurring image in the *Tao De Jing* is the uncarved block of wood. The uncarved block represents human nature before society and culture limit it. It represents infinite potential. Before being carved, the block of wood has potential to be anything. Once it is carved into something like a tool, chair, or table, then it is permanently limited. This shows how nature and the human person untouched by societal constructs are actually better off.

The valley is another recurring image illustrating a paradox. The Tao is found in hidden in lowly places, not in high visible places. We esteem mountains for their height, but valleys are filled with life-giving water. High places are dangerous during storms, but valleys are safe havens during storms.

Exalting “Yin”

Symbols, like the valley, emptiness, and weakness are more feminine than masculine. It has been noted that the *Tao De Jing* exalts “yin” traits against the popular but misguided notion that “yang” is superior. Women are passive and flexible. Yet they are more influential through hidden and indirect means than men who use direct force. Women typically outlive men. One of the quotes from the *Tao De Jing* says “A large country should take the very low place like a great watershed, which from its low position assumes the female role. The female overcomes the male by the power of her position. Her tranquility gives rise to her humility.”\(^5\)

\(^2\) *Tao Te Ching*, verse 88.
\(^3\) *Tao Te Ching*, verse 119.
\(^4\) *Tao Te Ching*, verse 27.
\(^5\) *Tao Te Ching*, verse 40–41.
Water is a primordial religious symbol often associated with the feminine. Although seemingly weak in its softness and malleability, water is more powerful than what is hard and unyielding. With patient persistence, water can wear away a rock. Tao De Jing says: “Water is the softest and most yielding substance. Yet nothing is better than water for overcoming the hard and rigid.” ⁶ Like water, the Tao is found in lowly places. The Tao De Jing says: “The supreme good is like water, which benefits all of creation without trying to compete with it. It gathers in the unpopular places. Thus, it is like the Tao” ⁷

**The Tao De Jing as a Taoist Classic**

The practical goal of the Tao De Jing is to teach rulers that by imitating the Tao in acting passively and without force, the nation will benefit and prosper. Passively “acting without acting” will stop aggression and violence: “When the world follows the Tao, horses run free to fertilize the fields. When the world does not follow the Tao, war horses are bred outside the cities.” ⁸ The book became a primary Taoist scripture, however, because it masterfully articulates core Taoist beliefs and values.

**Later Developments**

Some later forms of Taoism, made originally secondary emphases of mystical and philosophical Taoism primary. They also added aspects of other Pre-Axial and Axial Chinese traditions (like Buddhism). Interpreting the symbols of earlier Taoist texts literally, they sought the benefits that union with the Tao was said to bring. These included supernatural powers and, above all, immortality. They developed meditation and yogic practices to attain occult powers and eternal life.

Practices tried to increase and retain the vital force of life, or the “Ji” (transliterated “Chi.”). They would breathe slowly, like an infant, or held their breath for long periods of time. Some incorporated tantric yogic practices, like trying to retain the “vital fluid” of semen during sexual intercourse.

Another fascination was the quest for a potion that would grant eternal life. This did not mean a good afterlife, but rather immunity from aging. Some Taoist masters called the “Immortals” were believed to have attained this immortality.

There also became obsessed attempts to turn metal into gold. Offering their services to rulers and nobles, they sought power, wealth, and fame. These goals diverged significantly from original Taoist principles and values.

**“Church” Taoism**

Later Taoist sects incorporated and used a litany of Pre-Axial Chinese and traditional folk religious beliefs and practices. They engaged in yin-yang divination (I Ching), magic, dealing with spirits, and exorcisms. Figures like Lao Tzu were elevated to the status of deities who could grant favors. They compiled texts of myths, rituals, doctrine, and ethics that became the foundations of their sects. They also formed priesthoods. The populace saw these priests as possessing great supernatural powers. The laity would go to them for spiritual and material help. This “Church Taoism” persists to this day in rural China, but is viewed as superstition by the educated.

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⁶ *Tao Te Ching*, verse 186.
⁷ *Tao Te Ching*, verse 20.
⁸ *Tao Te Ching*, verse 104.