

Taoism

Taoism, a philosophical and religious system of China, where it has been second only to Confucianism in importance. As a philosophy its influence has been tremendous. It has supplemented and enriched Confucianism and contributed to the growth of Buddhism. It has provided spiritual inspiration and moral standards for the Chinese, while imbuing Chinese poetry, landscape painting, and other art forms with its love of nature and sense of serenity. As both a philosophy and a religion **Taoism** has supplied strength and refuge to the old, the poor, and the oppressed, and also to rebels and secret societies.

Philosophy

Theory. **Taoism** is named after its central idea, **Tao**, or "the Way," which is the basic principle of the universe. **Tao** is all-inclusive, everlasting, and good, but indescribable. It is not a thing but a creative process.

A person who grasps the meaning of **Tao**, the underlying principle and governor of all life, follows the doctrine of *wu-wei*, or "doing nothing." This means not interfering with Nature. It is the nature of a fish to swim, and it is the destiny of a mushroom to live for a day and a pine for 500 years. People are happy and free when they preserve their own nature and fulfill their own destiny, which they do by avoiding anxiety about life and death, rising above gain and loss, and living a simple and spontaneous life, like a child. The **Taoist** ruler shuns pomp and ceremony, warfare, and interference in his subjects' lives. Through gentleness, humility, and nonstruggle, people gain nobility of soul, serenity of mind, harmony of emotions, and freedom of spirit.

History. **Taoist** philosophy is traditionally traced back to Lao Tzu (6th century B.C.), a custodian of government archives whom Confucius consulted about ceremonies but about whom little is known. Tradition attributes to Lao Tzu the 5,000-word *Tao-te ching*, or *Classic of Tao and Its Virtue*, also called the *Lao Tzu*. This work, which contains the basic **Taoist** teachings, has been the most influential book in China next to the *Analects* of Confucius. The *Tao-te ching* was actually not written until after Lao Tzu's time, but some of its fundamental principles may well have been his.

The philosopher Chuang Tzu (4th?d century B.C.) raised **Taoism** to new heights with his doctrines of the equality of all things, the spontaneous transformation of **Tao**, and humanity's mystical union with the universe. The **Taoists** of the 3d and 4th centuries

A.D., who were called Neo-Taoists, developed the concept of nonbeing as pure, absolute reality. See also [Lao Tzu](#); [Chuang Tzu](#); [China --Philosophy and Religion](#).

Religion

While the **Taoist** philosophy was unfolding, priest-magicians were offering formulas to increase physical and mental power, restore youth, achieve superhuman ability, and obtain everlasting life on earth. By the 1st century B.C. the movement came to be known as the Way of Huang-Lao □fter Huang-ti, the legendary Yellow Emperor who was said to have achieved immortality, and Lao Tzu, possibly because he had taught that humans could achieve immortality.

The historical founder of the **Taoist** religion was Chang Ling, a popular religious leader and rebel. He urged his followers to read the *Tao-te ching* and in 143 A.D. organized them into the Way of Five Bushels (or Pecks) of Rice, so called because he collected that amount of grain from members. His followers called him "Heavenly Teacher" (*T'ien Shih*). The last holder of this title died in Taiwan in 1969.

Cult of Immortals. After the founding of the **Taoist** religion, two movements developed. One was the cult of immortals, which sought immortality through meditation, breathing exercises, bathing, gymnastics, sexual arts, medicines, chemistry, and other means. A measure of systemization was brought to this school of **Taoism** by Wei Po-yang (2d century A.D.), who in his *Ts'an-t'ung-ch'i*, or *The Three Ways Unified and Harmonized*, attempted to synthesize **Taoist** techniques for achieving immortality and teachings of the occult *I ching* (*Book of Changes*). He believed that all elements of the universe could be so concentrated and harmonized in one's body that life would be everlasting. Ko Hung (284?63) in his *Pao-p'u Tzu*, or *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity*, combined **Taoist** occultism with Confucian ethics and formulated a merit system whereby the number of days in a life are increased or decreased by one's deeds. Later **Taoists** abandoned the search for immortality and accepted the Buddhist promise of Paradise. They turned their attention to seeking earthly blessings like health and happiness.

Way of the Heavenly Teacher. The other **Taoist** movement, the Way of the Heavenly Teacher, was made into a highly organized religion by K'ou Ch'ien-chih (died 432), who regulated **Taoist** ceremonies, fixed the names of deities, and formulated a theology. This school has an enormous pantheon of gods of every description and many heroes and saints. It borrowed heavily from Buddhism, especially in its trinity of the Three Pure Ones, its belief in heavens and hells, and its

clergy, monasticism, and canon. Its practices include temple worship, offerings to the dead, geomancy and other forms of divination, as well as witchcraft and the use of charms or driving away evil spirits and obtaining earthly blessings.

The clergy divided into two schools. The Southern, or True Unity, School relies on charms and magic to preserve the human being's spirit, or true self. Its priests marry, live at home, and accept the Heavenly Teacher as their head. Priests of the Northern, or Complete Unity, School live in temples, are vegetarians, and rely on medicine and diet to prolong life.

History. **Taoism** was the state religion of China for a while during the 5th and 6th centuries and under the T'ang dynasty (618-906). Afterward it existed primarily as a religion of the illiterate masses. In modern times it has steadily declined.

In the People's Republic of China the religion is practically dormant, although many of its teachings □ atience, simplicity, contentment, harmony □ ave enduring appeal.

There has been some revival of **Taoism** in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

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