Survey of Taoism

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Introduction

Indigenous religio-philosophical tradition that has shaped Chinese life for more than 2,000 years. In the broadest sense, a Taoist attitude toward life can be seen in the accepting and yielding, the joyful and carefree sides of the Chinese character, an attitude that offsets and complements the moral and duty-conscious, austere and purposeful character ascribed to Confucianism. Taoism is also characterized by a positive, active attitude toward the occult and the metaphysical (theories on the nature of reality), whereas the agnostic, pragmatic Confucian tradition considers these issues of only marginal importance, although the reality of such issues is, by most Confucians, not denied.

More strictly defined, Taoism includes: the ideas and attitudes peculiar to the Lao-tzu (or Tao-te Ching; "Classic of the Way of Power"), the Chuang-tzu, the Lieh-tzu, and related writings; the Taoist religion, which is concerned with the ritual worship of the Tao; and those who identify themselves as Taoists.

Taoist thought permeates Chinese culture, including many aspects not usually considered Taoist. In Chinese religion, the Taoist tradition--often serving as a link between the Confucian tradition and folk tradition--has generally been more popular and spontaneous than the official (Confucian) state cult and less diffuse and shapeless than folk religion.

Taoist philosophy and religion have found their way into all Asian cultures influenced by China, especially those of Vietnam, Japan, and Korea. Various religious practices reminiscent of Taoism in such areas of Chinese cultural influence indicate early contacts with Chinese travellers and immigrants that have yet to be elucidated.

Both Western Sinologists and Chinese scholars themselves have distinguished--since Han times (206 BC-AD 220)--between a Taoist philosophy of the great mystics and their commentators (Tao-chia) and a later Taoist religion (Tao-chiao). This theory--no longer considered valid--was based on the view that the "ancient Taoism" of the mystics antedated the "later Neo-Taoist superstitions" that were misinterpretations of the mystics' metaphorical images. The mystics, however, should be viewed against the background of the religious practices existing in their own
times. Their ecstasies, for example, were closely related to the trances and spirit journeys of the early magicians and shamans (religious personages with healing and psychic transformation powers). Not only are the authors of the Tao-te Ching, the Chuang-tzu (book of "Master Chuang"), and the Lieh-tzu (book of "Master Lieh") not the actual and central founders of an earlier "pure" Taoism later degraded into superstitious practices but they can even be considered somewhat on the margin of older Taoist traditions. Therefore, because there has been a nearly continuous mutual influence between Taoists of different social classes--philosophers, ascetics, alchemists, and the priests of popular cults--the distinction between philosophical and religious Taoism in this article is made simply for the sake of descriptive convenience.

There is also a tendency among scholars today to draw a less rigid line between what is called Taoist and what is called Confucian. The two traditions share many of the same ideas about man, society, the ruler, Heaven, and the universe--ideas that were not created by either school but that stem from a tradition prior to either Confucius or Lao-tzu.

Viewed from this common tradition, orthodox Confucianism limited its field of interest to the creation of a moral and political system that fashioned society and the Chinese empire; whereas Taoism, inside the same world view, represented more personal and metaphysical preoccupations.

In the case of Buddhism--a third tradition that influenced China--fundamental concepts such as the nonexistence of the individual ego and the illusory nature of the physical world are diametrically opposed to Taoism. In terms of overt individual and collective practices, however, competition between these two religions for influence among the people--a competition in which Confucianism had no need to participate because it had state patronage--resulted in mutual borrowings, numerous superficial similarities, and essentially Chinese developments inside Buddhism, such as the Ch'an (Japanese Zen) sect. In folk religion, since Sung times (960-1279), Taoist and Buddhist elements have coexisted without clear distinctions in the minds of the worshippers.

General characteristics

The great sages and their associated texts

Lao-tzu and the Tao-te Ching

Behind all forms of Taoism stands the figure of Lao-tzu, traditionally regarded as the author of the classic text known as the Lao-tzu, or the Tao-te Ching ("Classic of the Way of Power"). The first mention of Lao-tzu is found in another early classic of Taoist speculation, the Chuang-tzu (4th-3rd century BC), so called after the name of its author. In this work Lao-tzu is described as being one of Chuang-tzu's own teachers, and the same book contains many of the Master's (Lao-tzu's) discourses, generally introduced by the questions of a disciple. The Chuang-tzu also presents seven versions of a meeting of Lao-tzu and Confucius. Lao-tzu is portrayed as the elder and his Taoist teachings confound his celebrated interlocutor. The Chuang-tzu also gives the only account of Lao-tzu's death. Thus in this early source, Lao-tzu appears as a senior contemporary of Confucius (6th-5th century BC) and a renowned Taoist master, a curator of the archives at the court of the Chou dynasty (c. 1111-255 BC) and, finally, a mere mortal.
The first consistent biographical account of Lao-tzu is found in the "Historical Records" (Shih-chi)--China's first universal history (2nd century BC)--of Ssu-ma Ch'ien. This concise résumé has served as the classical source on the philosopher's life. Lao-tzu's family name was Li, his given name Erh; and he occupied the post of archivist at the Chou court. He is said to have instructed Confucius on points of ceremony. Observing the decline of the Chou dynasty, Lao-tzu left the court and headed west. At the request of Yin Hsi, the guardian of the frontier pass, he wrote his treatise on the Tao in two scrolls. He then left China behind, and what became of him is not known. The historian quotes variant accounts, including one that attributed to Lao-tzu an exceptional longevity; the narrative terminates with the genealogy of eight generations of Lao-tzu's supposed descendants. With passing references in other early texts, this constitutes the body of information on the life of the sage as of the 2nd century BC; it is presumably legendary (see also Lao-tzu).

Modern scholarship has little to add to the Shih-chi account, and the Tao-te Ching, regarded by many scholars as a compilation that reached its final form only in the 3rd century BC, rather than the work of a single author, stands alone, with all its attractions and enigmas, as the fundamental text of both philosophical and religious Taoism.

The work's 81 brief sections contain only about 5,000 characters in all, from which fact derives still another of its titles, Lao Tzu's Five Thousand Words. The text itself appears in equal measure to express a profound quietism and determined views on government. It is consequently between the extremes of meditative introspection and political application that its many and widely divergent interpreters have veered.

The Tao-te Ching was meant as a handbook for the ruler. He should be a sage whose actions pass so unnoticed that his very existence remains unknown. He imposes no restrictions or prohibitions on his subjects; "so long as I love quietude, the people will of themselves go straight. So long as I act only by inactivity, the people will of themselves become prosperous." His simplicity makes the Ten Thousand Beings passionless and still and peace follows naturally. He does not teach them discrimination, virtue, or ambition because "when intellect emerges, the great artifices begin. When discord is rife in families, 'dutiful sons' appear. When the State falls into anarchy, 'loyal subjects' appear." Thus, it is better to banish wisdom, righteousness, and ingenuity, and the people will benefit a hundredfold.

Therefore the Holy Man rules by emptying their hearts (minds) and filling their bellies, weakening their wills and strengthening their bones, ever striving to make the people knowledgeless and desireless.

The word people in this passage more likely refers not to the common people but to those nobles and intellectuals who incite the ruler's ambition and aggressiveness.

War is condemned but not entirely excluded: "Arms are ill-omened instruments," and the sage uses them only when he cannot do otherwise. He does not glory in victory; "he that has conquered in battle is received with rites of mourning."

The book shares certain constants of classical Chinese thought but clothes them in an imagery of its own. The sacred aura surrounding kingship is here rationalized and expressed as "inaction" (wu-wei), demanding of the sovereign no more than right cosmological orientation at the centre of an obedient universe. Survivals of archaic notions concerning the compelling effect of renunciation--which the Confucians sanctified as ritual "deference" (jang)--are echoed in the recommendation to "hold to the role of the female," with an eye to the ultimate mastery that comes of passivity.

It is more particularly in the function attributed to the Tao, or Way, that this little tract stands apart. The term Tao was employed by all schools of thought. The universe has its Tao; there is a Tao of the sovereign, his royal mode of being, while the Tao of man comprises continuity through
procreation. Each of the schools, too, had its own Tao, its way or doctrine. But in the Tao-te Ching, the ultimate unity of the universal Tao itself is being proposed as a social ideal. It is this idealistic peculiarity that seems to justify later historians and bibliographers in their assignment of the term Taoist to the Tao-te Ching and its successors.

From a literary point of view, the Tao-te Ching is distinguished for its highly compressed style. Unlike the dialectic or anecdotal composition of other contemporary treatises, it articulates its cryptic subject matter in short, concise statements. More than half of these are in rhyme, and close parallelism recurs throughout the text. No proper name occurs anywhere. Although its historical enigmas are apparently insoluble, there is abundant testimony to the vast influence exercised by the book since the earliest times and in surprisingly varied social contexts. Among the classics of speculative Taoism, it alone holds the distinction of having become a scripture of the esoteric Taoist movements, which developed their own interpretations of its ambiguities and transmitted it as a sacred text.

**The interpretation of Chuang-tzu**

Pseudohistorical knowledge of the sage Chuang-tzu is even less well defined than that of Lao-tzu. Most of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's brief portrait of the man is transparently drawn from anecdotes in the Chuang-tzu itself and as such has no necessary basis in fact. The Chuang-tzu, however, is valuable as a monument of Chinese literature and because it contains considerable documentary material, describing numerous speculative trends and spiritual practices of the Warring States period (475-221 BC).

Whereas the Tao-te Ching is addressed to the sage-king, the Chuang-tzu is the earliest surviving Chinese text to present a philosophy for private life, a wisdom for the individual. Chuang-tzu is said to have preferred the doctrine of Lao-tzu over all others; many of his writings strike the reader as metaphorical illustrations of the terse sayings of the "Old Master."

Whereas Lao-tzu in his book as well as in his life (in legend) was concerned with Taoist rule, Chuang-tzu, some generations later, rejected all participation in society. He compared the servant of state to the well-fed decorated ox being led to sacrifice in the temple and himself to the untended piglet blissfully frolicking in the mire.

Here there is none of the Tao-te Ching's studied density. The rambling Chuang-tzu opens with a sprightly fable, illustrating the incomprehension of small wildfowl of the majestic splendour of a gigantic bird. Other such parables demonstrate the relativity of all values: the sliding scales of size, utility, beauty, and perfection. There is a colloquy between the Lord of the Yellow River and the God of the Eastern Ocean, in which the complacent self-satisfaction of the lesser spirit is shaken by his unexpected meeting with inconceivable vastness. Humble artisans are depicted, who, through the perfect mastery of their craft, exemplify for their social superiors the art of mastering life. Life and death are equated, and the dying are seen to welcome their approaching transformation as a fusion with the Tao. A succession of acquiescent cripples exclaims in rapture on the strange forms in which it has pleased heaven to shape them. Those involved in state ritual are brought onstage only to be mocked, and the propositions of contemporary logic-choppers are drawn into the unending whirl of paradox, spun out to their conclusions, and so abolished. Such are a few aspects of this wild kaleidoscope of unconventional thought, a landmark in Chinese literature. Its concluding chapter is a systematic account of the preeminent thinkers of the time, and the note of mock despair on which it closes typifies the Chuang-tzu's position regarding the more formal, straitlaced ideologies that it parodies.

Among the strange figures that people the pages of Chuang-tzu are a very special class of spiritualized being. Dwelling far apart from the turbulent world of men, dining on air and sipping the dew, they share none of the anxieties of ordinary folk and have the smooth, untroubled faces
of children. These "supreme men," or "perfect men," are immune to the effects of the elements, untouched by heat and cold. They possess the power of flight and are described as mounting upward with a fluttering (hsien) motion. Their effortless existence was the ultimate in autonomy, the natural spontaneity that Chuang-tzu ceaselessly applauds. These striking portraits may have been intended to be allegorical, but whatever their original meaning, these Immortals (hsien), as they came to be called, were to become the centre of great interest. Purely literary descriptions of their freedom, their breathtaking mobility, and their agelessness were construed as practical objectives by later generations. By a variety of practices, men attempted to attain these qualities in their own persons, and in time Chuang-tzu's unfettered paragons of liberty were to see themselves classified according to kind and degree in a hierarchy of the heavenly hosts (see also Chuang-tzu).

Basic concepts of Taoism

Certain concepts of ancient agrarian religion have dominated Chinese thought uninterruptedly from before the formation of the philosophic schools until the first radical break with tradition and the overthrow of dynastic rule at the beginning of the 20th century, and they are thus not specifically Taoist. The most important of these concepts are: the solidarity of nature and man; that is, the interaction between the universe and human society; the cyclical character of time and the universal rhythm and the law of return; and the worship of ancestors, the cult of Heaven, and the divine nature of the sovereign.

Concepts of the universe and natural order

Cosmology

What Lao-tzu calls the "permanent Tao" in reality is nameless. The name (ming) in ancient Chinese thought implied an evaluation assigning an object its place in a hierarchical universe. The Tao is outside these categories.

It is something formlessly fashioned, that existed before Heaven and Earth; . . . Its name (ming) we do not know; Tao is the byname that we give it. Were I forced to say to what class of things it belongs I should call it Immense.

Tao is the "imperceptible, indiscernible," about which nothing can be predicated but that latently contains the forms, entities, and forces of all particular phenomena: "It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang; the Named is the mother that rears the Ten Thousand Beings, each after its kind." The Nameless (wu-ming) and the Named (yu-ming), Not-Being (wu) and Being (yu), are interdependent and "grow out of one another."

Not-Being (wu) and Tao are not identical; wu and yu are two aspects of the permanent Tao: "in its mode of being Unseen, we will see its mysteries; in the mode of the Seen, we will see its boundaries."

Not-Being does not mean Nothingness but rather the absence of perceptible qualities; in Lao-tzu's view it is superior to Being. It is the Void (that is, empty incipience) that harbours in itself all potentialities and without which even Being lacks its efficacy.
Emptiness realized in the mind of the Taoist who has freed himself from all obstructing notions and distracting passions makes the Tao act through him without obstacle. An essential characteristic that governs the Tao is spontaneity (tzu-juan), the what-is-so-of-itself, the self-so, the unconditioned. The Tao, in turn, governs the universe: "The ways of Heaven are conditioned by those of the Tao, and the ways of Tao by the Self-so."

This is the way of the saint who does not intervene but possesses the total power of spontaneous realization that is at work in the universe; of his accomplishments "everyone, throughout the country, says 'It happened of its own accord' (tzu-juan)."

The microcosm-macrocosm concept

The conception of the universe common to all Chinese philosophy is neither materialistic nor animistic (a belief system centring on soul substances); it can be called magical or even alchemical. The universe is viewed as a hierarchically organized mechanism in which every part reproduces the whole. Man is a microcosm (small universe) corresponding rigorously to this macrocosm (large universe); his body reproduces the plan of the cosmos. Between man and universe there exists a system of correspondences and participations that the ritualists, philosophers, alchemists, and physicians have described but certainly not invented. This originally magical feeling of the integral unity of mankind and the natural order has always characterized the Chinese mentality, and the Taoists especially have elaborated upon it. The five organs of the body and its orifices and the dispositions, features, and passions of man correspond to the five directions, the five holy mountains, the sections of the sky, the seasons, and the elements (wu-hsing), which in China are not material but more like five fundamental phases of any process in space-time. Whoever understands man thus understands the structure of the universe. The physiologist knows that blood circulates because rivers carry water and that the body has 360 articulations because the ritual year has 360 days. In religious Taoism the interior of the body is inhabited by the same gods as those of the macrocosm. An adept often searches for his divine teacher in all the holy mountains of China until he finally discovers him in one of the "palaces" inside his head.

Return to the Tao

The law of the Tao as natural order refers to the continuous reversion of everything to its starting point. Anything that develops extreme qualities will invariably revert to the opposite qualities: "Reversion is the movement of the Tao" (Lao-tzu). All being issues from the Tao and ineluctably returns to it; Undifferentiated Unity becomes multiplicity in the movement of the Tao. Life and death are contained in this eternal transformation from Non-Being into Being and back to Non-Being, but the underlying primordial unity is never lost.

For society, any reform means a type of return to the remote past; civilization is considered a degradation of the natural order, and the ideal is the return to an original purity. For the individual, wisdom is to conform to the rhythm of the universe. The Taoist mystic, however, not only adapts himself ritually and physiologically to the alternations of nature but creates a void inside himself that permits him to return to nature's origin. Lao-tzu, in trance, "wandered freely in the origin of all beings." Thus, in ecstasy he escaped the rhythm of life and death by contemplating the universal return. "Having attained perfect emptiness, holding fast to stillness, I can watch the return of the ever active Ten Thousand Beings." The number 10,000 symbolizes totality.

Change and transformation
All parts of the universe are attuned in a rhythmical pulsation. Nothing is static; all beings are subjected to periodical mutations and transformations that represent the Chinese view of creation. Instead of being opposed with a static ideal, change itself is systematized and made intelligible, as in the theory of the five phases (wu-hsing) and in the 64 hexagrams of the I Ching (Classic of Changes), which are basic recurrent constellations in the general flux. An unchanging unity (the permanent Tao) was seen as underlying the kaleidoscopic plurality.

Chuang-tzu's image for creation was that of the activity of the potter and the bronze caster: "to shape and to transform" (tsao hua). These are two phases of the same process: the imperceptible Tao shapes the universe continuously out of primordial chaos; the perpetual transformation of the universe by the alternations of Yin and Yang, or complementary energies (seen as night and day or as winter and summer), is nothing but the external aspect of the same Tao. The shaping of the Ten Thousand Beings by the Supreme Unity and their transformation by Yin and Yang are both simultaneous and perpetual. Thus, the saint's ecstatic union is a "moving together with the Tao; dispersing and concentrating, his appearance has no consistency." United with the permanent Tao, the saint's outer aspect becomes one of ungraspable change. Because the gods can become perceptible only by adapting to the mode of this changing world, their apparitions are "transformations" (pien-hua); and the magician (hua-jen) is believed to be one who transforms rather than one who conjures out of nothing.

**Concepts of man and society**

**Wu-wei**

The power acquired by the Taoist is te, the efficacy of the Tao in the realm of Being, which is translated as "virtue." Lao-tsu viewed it, however, as different from Confucian virtue:

The man of superior virtue is not virtuous, and that is why he has virtue. The man of inferior [Confucian] virtue never strays from virtue, and that is why he has no virtue.

The "superior virtue" of Taoism is a latent power that never lays claim to its achievements; it is the "mysterious power" (hsüan te) of Tao present in the heart of the sage--"the man of superior virtue never acts (wu-wei), and yet there is nothing he leaves undone."

Wu-wei is not an ideal of absolute inaction nor a mere "not-overdoing." It is an action so well in accordance with things that its author leaves no trace of himself in his work: "Perfect activity leaves no track behind it; perfect speech is like a jade worker whose tool leaves no mark." It is the Tao that "never acts, yet there is nothing it does not do." There is no true achievement without wu-wei because every deliberate intervention in the natural course of things will sooner or later turn into the opposite of what was intended and will result in failure.

The sage who practices wu-wei lives out of his original nature before it was tampered with by knowledge and restricted by morality; he has reverted to infancy (that is, the undiminished vitality of the newborn state); he has "returned to the state of the Uncarved Block (p'u)." P'u is uncut, unpainted wood, simplicity. Society carves this wood into specific shapes for its own use and thus robs the individual piece of its original totality. "Once the uncarved block is carved, it forms utensils (that is, instruments of government); but when the Sage uses it, he would be fit to become Chief of all Ministers. This is why the great craftsman (ruler) does not carve (rule)."

**The social ideal of primitivism**
Any willful human intervention is believed to be able to ruin the harmony of the natural transformation process. The spontaneous rhythm of the primitive agrarian community and its unself-conscious symbiosis with nature's cycles is thus the Taoist ideal of society.

In the ideal society there are no books; the Lao-tzu (Tao-te Ching) itself would not have been written but for the entreaty of the guardian of the pass Yin Hsi, who asked the "Old Master" to write down his thoughts. In the Golden Age, past or future, knotted cords are the only form of records. The people of this age are "dull and unwitting, they have no desire; this is called uncarved simplicity. In uncarved simplicity the people attain their true nature."

Chuang-tzu liked to oppose the Heaven-made and the man-made; that is, nature and society. He wanted man to renounce all artificial "cunning contrivances" that facilitate his work but lead to "cunning hearts" and agitated souls in which the Tao will not dwell. Man should equally renounce all concepts of measure, law, and virtue. "Fashion pecks and bushels for people to measure by and they will steal by peck and bushel." He blamed not only the culture heroes and inventors praised by the Confucians but also the sages who shaped the rites and rules of society.

That the unwrought substance was blighted in order to fashion implements--this was the crime of the artisan. That the Way (Tao) and its Virtue (te) were destroyed in order to create benevolence and righteousness--this was the fault of the sage.

Even "coveting knowledge" is condemned because it engenders competition and "fight to the death over profit."

**Ideas of knowledge and language**

Characteristic of Chuang-tzu are his ideas of knowledge and language developed under the stimulus of his friend and opponent, the philosopher Hui Shih.

Because, in the Taoist view, all beings and everything are fundamentally one, opposing opinions can arise only when people lose sight of the Whole and regard their partial truths as absolute. They are then like the frog at the bottom of the well who takes the bit of brightness he sees for the whole sky. The closed systems--i.e., the passions and prejudices into which petty minds shut themselves--hide the Tao, the "Supreme Master" who resides inside themselves and is superior to all distinctions.

Thus, Chuang-tzu's holy man fully recognizes the relativity of notions like good and evil and true and false. He is neutral and open to the extent that he offers no active resistance to any would-be opponent, whether it be a person or an idea. "When you argue, there are some things you are failing to see. In the greatest Tao nothing is named; in the greatest disputation, nothing is said."

The person who wants to know the Tao is told: "Don't meditate, don't cogitate . . . . Follow no school, follow no way, and then you will attain the Tao"; discard knowledge, forget distinctions, reach no-knowledge. "Forget" indicates that distinctions had to be known first. The original ignorance of the child is distinguished from the no-knowledge of the sage who can "sit in forgetfulness."

The mystic does not speak because declaring unity, by creating the duality of the speaker and the affirmation, destroys it. Those who speak about the Tao (like Chuang-tzu himself) are "wholly wrong. For he who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know." Chuang-tzu was aware of the fact that, in speaking about it, he could do no more than hint at the way toward the all-
embracing and intuitive knowledge.

**Identity of life and death**

Mystic realization does away with the distinction between the self and the world. This idea also governs Chuang-tzu's attitude toward death. Life and death are but one of the pairs of cyclical phases, such as day and night or summer and winter. "Since life and death are each other's companions, why worry about them? All beings are one." Life and death are not in opposition but merely two aspects of the same reality, arrested moments out of the flux of the universal mutations of everything into everything. Man is no exception; "he goes back into the great weaving machine: thus all beings issue from the Loom and return to the Loom."

Viewed from the single reality experienced in ecstasy, it is just as difficult to distinguish life from death as it is to distinguish the waking Chuang-tzu from the dreaming butterfly. Death is natural, and men ought neither to fear nor to desire it. Chuang-tzu's attitude thus is one of serene acceptance.

**Religious goals of the individual**

The Confucian saint (sheng) is viewed as a ruler of antiquity or a great sage who taught men how to return to the rites of antiquity. The Taoist sainthood, however, is internal (nei sheng), although it can become manifest in an external royalty (wai wang) that brings the world back to the Way by means of quietism: variously called "non-intervention" (wu-wei), "inner cultivation" (nei yeh), or "art of the heart and mind" (hsin-shu).

Whereas worldly ambitions, riches, and (especially) discursive knowledge scatter the person and drain his energies, the saint "embraces Unity" or "holds fast to the One" (pao i); that is, he aspires to union with the Tao in a primordial undivided state underlying consciousness. "Embracing Unity" also means that he maintains the balance of Yin and Yang within himself and the union of his spiritual (hun) and vegetative (p'o) souls, the dispersion of which spells death; Taoists usually believed there were three hun and seven p'o. The spiritual soul tends to wander (in dreams), and any passion or desire can result in loss of soul. To retain and harmonize one's souls is important for physical life as well as for the unification of the whole human entity. Cleansed of every distraction, the saint creates inside himself a void that in reality is plenitude. Empty of all impurity, he is full of the original energy (yuan chi), which is the principle of life that in the ordinary man decays from the moment of birth on.

Because vital energy and spirituality are not clearly distinguished, old age in itself becomes a proof of sainthood. The aged Taoist sage became a saint because he had been able to cultivate himself throughout a long existence; his longevity in itself was the proof of his sainthood and union with the Tao. Externally he had a healthy, flourishing appearance and inside he contained an ever-flowing source of energy that manifested itself in radiance and in a powerful, beneficial influence on his surroundings, which is the charismatic efficacy (te) of the Tao.

The mystic insight of Chuang-tzu made him scorn those who strove for longevity and immortality through physiological practices. Nevertheless, physical immortality was a Taoist goal probably long before and alongside the unfolding of Taoist mysticism. The adept of immortality had a choice among many methods that were all intended to restore the pure energies possessed at birth by the infant whose perfect vital force Lao-tzu admired. Through these methods, the adept became an immortal (hsien) who lived 1,000 years in this world if he so chose and, once satiated with life, "ascended to heaven in broad daylight." This was the final apotheosis of the Taoist who had transformed his body into pure Yang energy.
Chuang-tzu's descriptions of the indescribable Tao, as well as of those who have attained union with the Tao, are invariably poetic. The perfect man has identified his life rhythm so completely with the rhythm of the forces of nature that he has become indistinguishable from them and shares their immortality and infinity, which is above the cycle of ordinary life and death. He is "pure spirit. He feels neither the heat of the brushlands afire nor the cold of the waters in flood"; nothing can startle or frighten him. Not that he is magically invulnerable (as the adepts of physical immortality would have it), but he is "so cautious in shunning and approaching, that nothing can do him injury."

"A man like this rides the clouds as his carriages and the sun and moon as his steeds." The theme of the spiritual wandering (yüan yu), which can be traced back to the shamanistic soul journey, crops up wherever Chuang-tzu speaks of the perfect man.

Those who let themselves be borne away by the unadulterated energies of Heaven and Earth and can harness the six composite energies to roam through the limitless, whatever need they henceforth depend on?

These wanderings are journeys within oneself; they are roamings through the Infinite in ecstasy. Transcending the ordinary distinctions of things and one with the Tao, "the Perfect Man has no self, the Holy Man has no merit, the Sage has no fame." He lives inconspicuously among men, and whatever applies to the Tao applies to him.

Symbolism and mythology

Taoists prefer to convey their ecstatic insights in images and parables. The Tao is low and receiving as a valley, soft and life-giving as water, and it is the "mysterious female," the source of all life, the Mother of the Ten Thousand Beings. Man should become weak and yielding as water that overcomes the hard and the strong and always takes the low ground; he should develop his male and female sides but "prefer femininity," "feed on the mother," and find within himself the well that never runs dry. Tao is also the axis, the ridgepole, the pivot, and the empty centre of the hub. The sage is the "useless tree" or the huge gourd too large to be fashioned into implements. A frequent metaphor for the working of the Tao is the incommunicable ability to be skillful at a craft. The skilled artisan does not ponder on his action, but, in union with the Tao of his subject, he does his work reflexively and without conscious intent.

Much ancient Chinese mythology has been preserved by the Taoists, who drew on it to illustrate their views. A chaos (hun-tun) myth is recorded as a metaphor for the undifferentiated primal unity; the mythical emperors (Huang Ti and others) are extolled for wise Taoist rule or blamed for introducing harmful civilization. Dreams of mythical paradises and journeys on clouds and flying dragons are metaphors for the wanderings of the soul, the attainment of the Tao, and the identity of dream and reality.

Taoists have transformed and adapted some ancient myths to their beliefs. Thus, the Queen Mother of the West (Hsi Wang Mu), who was a mountain spirit, pestilence goddess, and tigress, became a high deity--the Fairy Queen of all immortals.

Early eclectic contributions

The idea of Yin and Yang

Yin and Yang literally mean "dark side" and "sunny side" of a hill. They are mentioned for the first
time in the Hsi tz'u, or "Appended Explanations" (c. 4th century BC), an appendix to the I Ching (Classic of Changes): "One [time] Yin, one [time] Yang, this is the Tao." Yin and Yang are two complementary, interdependent principles or phases alternating in space and time; they are emblems evoking the harmonious interplay of all pairs of opposites in the universe.

First conceived by musicians, astronomers, or diviners and then propagated by a school that came to be named after them, Yin and Yang became the common stock of all Chinese philosophy. The Taoist treatise Huai-nan-tzu (book of "Master Huai-nan") describes how the one "Primordial Breath" (yüan ch'i) split into the light ethereal Yang breath, which formed Heaven; and the heavier, cruder Yin breath, which formed Earth. The diversifications and interactions of Yin and Yang produced the Ten Thousand Beings.

The warm breath of Yang accumulated to produce fire, the essence of which formed the sun. The cold breath of Yin accumulated to produce water, the essence of which became the moon.

**The idea of ch'i**

Yin and Yang are often referred to as two "breaths" (ch'i). Ch'i means air, breath, or vapour--originally the vapour arising from cooking cereals. It also came to mean a cosmic energy. The Primordial Breath is a name of the chaos (state of Unity) in which the original life force is not yet diversified into the phases that the concepts Yin and Yang describe.

Every man has a portion of this primordial life-force allotted to him at birth, and his task is not to dissipate it through the activity of his senses but to strengthen, control, and increase it in order to live out his full span of life.

**The idea of wu-hsing**

Another important set of notions associated with the same school of Yin-Yang are the "five agents" or "phases" (wu-hsing) or "powers" (wu-te): water, fire, wood, metal, earth. They are also "breaths" (i.e., active energies), the idea of which enabled the philosophers to construct a coherent system of correspondences and participations linking all phenomena of the macrocosm and the microcosm. Associated with spatial directions, seasons of the year, colours, musical notes, animals, and other aspects of nature, they also correspond, in the human body, to the five inner organs. The Taoist techniques of longevity are grounded in these correspondences. The idea behind such techniques was that of nourishing the inner organs with the essences corresponding to their respective phases and during the season dominated by the latter.

**Yang Chu and the Lieh-tzu**

Yang Chu (c. 400 BC) is representative of the early pre-Taoist recluses, "those who hid themselves" (yin-shih), who, in the Analects of Confucius, ridiculed Confucius' zeal to improve society. Yang Chu held that each individual should value his own life above all else, despise wealth and power, and not agree to sacrifice even a single hair of his head to benefit the whole world. The scattered sayings of Yang Chu in pre-Han texts are much less hedonistic than his doctrine as it is presented in the Lieh-tzu (book of "Master Lieh").
Lieh-tzu was a legendary Taoist master whom Chuang-tzu described as being able to "ride the wind and go soaring around with cool and breezy skill." In many old legends Lieh-tzu is the paragon of the spiritual traveller. The text named after him (of uncertain date) presents a philosophy that views natural changes and human activities as wholly mechanistic in their operation; neither human effort nor divine destiny can change the course of things.

**Kuan-tzu and Huai-nan-tzu**

In the several Taoist chapters of the Kuan-tzu (book of "Master Kuan"), another text of uncertain date, emphasis is placed on "the art of the heart (mind)"; the heart governs the body as the chief governs the state. If the organs and senses submit to it, the heart can achieve a desirelessness and emptiness that make it a pure receptacle of the "heart inside the heart," a new soul that is the indwelling Tao.

The Huai-nan-tzu is a compilation of essays written by different learned magicians (fang-shih) at the court of their patron, the Prince of Huai-nan. Although lacking in unity, it is a compendium of the knowledge of the time that had been neglected by the less speculative scholars of the new state Confucianism. The Huai-nan-tzu discusses the most elaborate cosmology up to that time, the position of man in the macrocosm, the ordering of society, and the ideal of personal sainthood.

**History**

**Taoism in the Ch'in and Han periods (221 BC-AD 220) of the Chinese empire**

**Esoteric traditions of eastern China**

The textual remains of Taoism during the Warring States period were all presumably produced in connection with official patronage; similarly, developments in Taoist thought and practice during the early Imperial age principally have to be studied from the vantage point of the court. At the Imperial court, representatives of different local traditions met as competitors for official favour, and the court consequently served as the principal meeting place for the exchange of ideas. The historians who recorded the progress of these varying intellectual and religious currents were themselves court officials and often were active participants in the movements they describe. The emperors, anxious to consolidate and expand their power, were a natural focus for wonder-workers and specialists in esoteric arts.

A series of such wonder-workers from the eastern seaboard visited the courts of the Ch'in and early Han. They told of islands in the ocean, peopled by immortal beings--which the Chuang-tzu had described--and so convincing were their accounts that sizable expeditions were fitted out and sent in search of them. The easterners brought the cults of their own region to the capital, recommending and supervising the worship of astral divinities who would assure the emperor's health and longevity. One of their number, Li Shao-chün, bestowed on the Han emperor Wu Ti counsels that are a résumé of the spiritual preoccupations of the time. The emperor was to perform sacrifices to the furnace (tsao), which would enable him to summon spiritual beings. They in turn would permit him to change cinnabar powder (mercuric sulfide) into gold, from which vessels were to be made, out of which he would eat and drink. This would increase his span of life
and permit him to behold the immortals (hsien) who dwell on the Isles of P'eng-lai, in the midst of the sea. Here, for the first time, alchemy joins the complex of activities that were supposed to contribute to the prolongation of life.

**The Huang-Lao tradition**

Also originating in the eastern coastal region (Shantung), alongside these same thaumaturgic (wonder-working) tendencies, was the learned tradition of the Huang-Lao masters, devotees of the legendary "Yellow Emperor" (Huang Ti) and Lao-tzu. The information on the life of Lao-tzu transmitted by Ssu-ma Ch'ien probably derives directly from their teaching. They venerated Lao-tzu as a sage whose instructions, contained in his cryptic book, describe the perfect art of government. The Yellow Emperor, with whose reign Ssu-ma Ch'ien's universal history opens, was depicted as a ruler of the Golden Age who achieved his success because he applied his teachers' precepts to government. The Yellow Emperor also was the patron of technology; and the classic works of many arcane arts, including alchemy, medicine, sexual techniques, cooking, and dietetics, were all placed under his aegis. Unlike Lao-tzu, the Yellow Emperor is always the disciple, an unremitting seeker of knowledge, and the Huang-Lao masters' ideal of the perfect ruler.

From the court of the King of Ch'i (in present-day Shantung Province) where they were already expounding the Lao-tzu in the 3rd century BC, the teachings of the Huang-Lao masters soon spread throughout learned and official circles in the capital. Many early Han statesmen became their disciples and attempted to practice government by inaction (wu-wei); among them were also scholars who cultivated esoteric arts. Although their doctrine lost its direct political relevance during the reign of the emperor Wu Ti (reigned 141/140-87/86 BC), their ensemble of teachings concerning both ideal government and practices for prolonging life continued to evoke considerable interest and is perhaps the earliest truly Taoist movement of which there is clear historical evidence.

**Revolutionary messianism**

Among the less welcome visitors at the Han court had been a certain Kan Chung-k'o. At the end of the 1st century BC he presented to the emperor a "Classic of the Great Peace" (T'ai-p'ing Ching) that he claimed had been revealed to him by a spirit, who had come to him with the order to renew the Han dynasty. His temerity cost him his life, but the prophetic note of dynastic renewal became stronger during the interregnum of Wang Mang (AD 9-23); and other works--bearing the same title--continued to appear. At this time, promoters of a primitivistic and utopian T'ai-p'ing (Great Peace) ideology continued to support the Imperial Liu (Han) family, claiming that they would be restored to power through the aid of the Li clan. A century and a half later, however, as the power of the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25-220) declined, the populace no longer hoped for a renewal of Han rule.

The great Yellow Turban Rebellion broke out in the east in AD 184. Its leader, Chang Chüeh, declared that the "blue heaven" was to be replaced by a "yellow heaven"; and his followers wore yellow turbans in token of this expectation. Worshipping a "Huang-lao Chün," the movement gained a vast number of adherents throughout eastern China. Though they were eventually defeated by the Imperial forces, the tendency towards messianic revolt continued to manifest itself at frequent intervals. A great many charismatic leaders came from the Li family, and certain of them claimed to be the god Lao-tzu returned to earth; a sage of western China, Li Hung, who had actually lived during the 1st century BC, became the favourite recurrent figure of later would-be messiahs. Such revolutionary religious movements, which included Taoist ideological elements, remained a persistent feature of medieval Chinese history. The last recorded Li Hung was
executed in 1112. These sporadic popular manifestations of revolutionary messianism, though, did not represent the activities of the formal Taoist organization and must be distinguished from the organized religious Taoism that also appeared at the end of the Later Han period.

**Development of the Taoist religion from the 2nd to the 6th century**

**The emergence of a "Taocracy"**

**The Way of the Celestial Masters**

The protagonist of the Classic of the Great Peace is a celestial master. When another important religious movement began in China's far west at about the same time as the group in the northeast arose, in the second half of the 2nd century AD, the same title was given to its founder, Chang Tao-ling. It is with this Way of the Celestial Masters (T'ien-shih Tao) that the history of organized religious Taoism may be said to begin, in that there has been an unbroken continuity from that time down to the present day, as the movement soon spread to all of China.

In AD 142, in the mountains of the province of Szechwan, Chang is said to have received a revelation from T'ai-shang Lao-chün (Lord Lao the Most High). The deified Lao-tzu bestowed on Chang his "orthodox and sole doctrine of the authority of the covenant" (cheng-i meng-wei fa), meant as a definitive replacement for the religious practices of the people, which are described as having lapsed into demonism and degeneracy.

The new dispensation at first was probably intended as a substitute for the effete rule of the Han central administration. Chang is said in time to have ascended on high and to have received the title of t'ien-shih, and by the latter part of the 2nd century, under the leadership of his descendants, the T'ien-shih Tao constituted an independent religio-political organization with authority throughout the region, a "Taocracy" (rule of Tao), in which temporal and spiritual powers converged. For ceremonial and administrative purposes, the realm was divided into 24 (later 28 and 36) units, or parishes (chih). The focal point of each was the oratory, or "chamber of purity" (ching-shih), which served as the centre for communication with the powers on high. Here the chi-chiu ("libationer"), the priestly functionary of the nuclear community, officiated. Each household contributed a tax of five pecks of rice to the administration, whence came the other common name of the movement, the Way of the Five Pecks of Rice (Wu-tou-mi Tao).

The ritual activities of the libationer seem principally to have been directed towards the cure of disease by prescribed ceremonial means. Believed to be a punishment for evil deeds, whether committed by the sufferer himself or by an ancestor, illness was in fact a sentence pronounced by the San Kuan (Three Officials), judges and custodians of the dead. The sentence was carried out by the spectral hordes of the Six Heavens (Liu T'ien), a posthumous dwelling place of all unhallowed mortals. Against such judicial severity, only formal appeal to higher authority might avail. Using the rising flame and smoke of the incense burner in the centre of the oratory to transmit the message borne by spirits exteriorized from within his own body, the libationer submitted petitions (chang) to the appropriate bureau of the three Taoist heavens (san t'ien). The Taoist canon contains long lists of the "officials and generals" (kuan chiang), each specializing in a different sort of complaint, who would respectively pronounce on the appeal and marshal the celestial forces against the offending demons.
The officiant came to dispose of a large selection of bureaucratic stock drafts: memorials, plaints, and appeals, all of which were modelled on secular administrative usage. Also effective were written talismans (fu); drawn by the libationer, these would be burned and the ashes, mixed with water, swallowed by the demons' victim. The libationer also functioned as a moral preceptor, instructing the faithful in the sect's own highly allegorical interpretation of the Lao-tzu, which they considered to be the revealed work of Lord Lao the Most High. Their fundamental concern with right actions and good works as being most in the spirit of the Tao and consequently ensuring immunity from disease is also shown by their construction of way stations in which provisions and shelter were placed for the convenience and use of travellers, as well as in the numerous injunctions to charity and forbearance recorded in the written codes of the movement.

Communal ceremonies

Both the nuclear communities and the "Taocratic" realm as a whole were bound together by a ritual cycle, of which only fragmentary indications remain. Among the most important ceremonial occasions were the communal feasts (ch'u) offered at certain specific times throughout the year (during the first, seventh, and 10th months) as well as on other important occasions, such as initiation into the hierarchy, advancement in rank or function, or the consecration of an oratory. These feasts were of varying degrees of elaborateness, depending on the circumstances. The common essential element, however, was the sharing of certain foods, in prescribed quantities, among masters and disciples. This was envisaged as a communion with the Tao, at once attesting the close compact with the celestial powers enjoyed by the members of the parish and reinforcing their own sense of cohesion as a group.

Much more notorious was the rite known as the Union of Breaths (Ho Ch'i), a communal sexual ritual said to have been celebrated at each new moon. Later Buddhist sources described this as a riotous orgy of outrageous and disgusting license. Several cryptic manuals of instruction for the priest in charge of these proceedings are preserved in the canon; and they depict, however, scenarios of a highly stylized erotic choreography of cosmic significance. Like the communal feasts, these rites might be interpreted as a concentrated and idealized adaptation of older, more diffuse agrarian religious customs. This suggests a pattern of the integration of local practices that has remained characteristic of Taoism throughout its history.

Official recognition of the Taoist organization

In AD 215, the celestial master Chang Lu, grandson of Chang Tao-ling, submitted to the authority of the Han general Ts'ao Ts'ao, who six years later founded the Wei dynasty in the north. This resulted in official recognition of the sect by the dynasty; the celestial masters in turn expressed their spiritual approbation of the Wei's mandate to replace the Han. Under these conditions a formal definition of the relations of organized Taoism to the secular powers developed. In contrast to the popular messianic movements, Lao-tzu's manifestation to Chang Tao-ling was considered to be definitive; the god was not incarnate in them but rather designated Chang and his successors as his representatives on earth. Under a worthy dynasty, which governed by virtue of the Tao, the role of the celestial masters was that of acting as intermediaries for celestial confirmation and support. Only when a responsible ruler was lacking were the celestial masters to take over the temporal guidance of the people and hold the supreme power in trust for a new incumbent. Abetted by this flexible ideology of compromise, the sect made constant progress at the courts of the Wei and Western Chin dynasties until, by the end of the 3rd century, it counted among its adherents many of the most powerful families in North China.

The literature of Taoist esoterism
**The scholiasts**

The most famous of the many commentaries on Tao-te Ching was written by Wang Pi (AD 226-249). He is regarded as a founder of the school of Dark Learning (hsüan-hsüeh), a highly conservative philosophical movement that enjoyed a certain vogue among the cultured elite of the 3rd and 4th centuries. The Chuang-tzu was not long afterward annotated by Kuo Hsiang (died 312), in whose work the fundamental Confucian bias is even more prominent. The writings of these men have in recent years sometimes been called "Neo-Taoism," but nothing could be more misleading. Their primary aim was to harmonize Tao-te Ching and Chuang-tzu with their own conception of a practical life devoted to affairs of state. As administrators confronted with the challenge of Taoist thought, they preferred not to take its message at face value. Interpretative commentaries continued to be written on the classics of speculative Taoism in which the aid of the most diverse philosophies was called upon, not excluding Buddhism. Like the work of the 3rd and 4th century scholiasts, these represent the ideas of a tiny minority, the members of the scholar-official class. Though excursions into ever more refined scholasticism continued to be a diversion for them, the real creative vitality of Taoism was to be found elsewhere.

**Lives of the Immortals**

By the Han period, the careers of those free spirits described in Chuang-tzu were the subject of universal interest. The earliest systematic collection of biographical notices on these legendary figures is the Lives of the Immortals (Lieh-hsien chuan) of the early 2nd century AD. Such collections were a genre of the time. Brief sketches were provided for 72 figures: the same symbolic number as was found in contemporary collections of the "Lives" of the disciples of Confucius, eminent scholar-officials, and famous women. Thus Immortals came to be classified as yet another category in the highly stylized gallery of ancient worthies. Each notice is followed by a short hymn of praise. This was the standard form of inscriptions on stone; its employment in hagiographic literature may have influenced the later development of the chantefable in alternating passages of prose and verse. The text appears to reflect a growing number of local cults dedicated to individual Immortals, while the many plants mentioned suggest the extent of the use of herbal compounds as a means to transcendence.

**Inscriptions**

These literary notices are supplemented by epigraphic evidence, inscriptions on stone or bronze. The simplest of these are bronze mirrors depicting the plumed figures of airborne Immortals and bearing short rhyming texts of a general nature. Longer and more explicit are the texts of inscriptions on stone: tablets dedicated to the cult of a particular Immortal. They open with their subject's vital statistics, list his latter-day manifestations, and commemorate offerings made in his honour. But all of this is only by way of preface to the core of the inscription, in which his merits are celebrated in verse. Such was the eloquent votive tablet erected in honour of Wang Tzu-ch'iao, a perennial favourite among the Immortals (AD 165). Another, dedicated to Lao-tzu in the same year, describes the supposed author of the Tao-te Ching as a god, to whom worship had been paid by the then reigning emperor.

**Texts on the cult of Lao-tzu**

One of the most complex and interesting phenomena in Chinese religious history is Lao-tzu's advancement from sage to god. A scroll found in the walled-up desert library at Tun-huang, the
Book of the Transformations of Lao-tzu (Lao-tzu Pien-hua Ching), shows him in cosmic perspective, omnipresent and omnipotent, the origin of all life. His human manifestations are listed, followed by his successive roles in legendary history, as the sage counsellor of emperors. Next, five of his more recent appearances are mentioned, dated AD 132-155, and localized in west China, where a temple is said to have been dedicated to him in 185. Then the god speaks, to describe his own powers. He recommends to his votaries the recitation of "my book in 5,000 words" (the Tao-te Ching) and enjoins a meditation on his own divine attributes as they appear within the adept's body. Finally, he calls upon the faithful to join him, now, when he is about to strike at the tottering rule of the Han dynasty. Evidently the product of a messianic group in west China at the end of the 2nd century, this valuable fragment of only 95 lines is written in a strangely disfigured Chinese, in part a reflection of its popular milieu. But it still shows more clearly than many longer and better preserved texts the essential cohesion of the several aspects of esoteric Taoism: hagiography, recitation of scriptures, and visionary meditation, all of which are here given additional temporal unity by the messianic context.

The Southern tradition

The political partition of China into three parts following the collapse of the Han dynasty in AD 220, the so-called period of the Three Kingdoms, had its spiritual counterpart in certain well-defined regional religious differences. Against the independent dynasties in the north and west stood the empire of Wu, south of the Yangtze River.

Developments in alchemical and other traditions

A region exposed comparatively lately to Chinese influence, this southeastern area had long been famous for its aboriginal sorcerers and dancing mediums. In the course of Chinese colonization, separate learned spiritual traditions developed alongside the ecstatic practices of the populace. To the court of the emperors of Wu came savants and wonder-workers representing a variety of traditions that were to acquire lasting influence.

Among these personages was a certain Ko Hsüan (3rd century AD), who was said to have been initiated into an ancient alchemical tradition. His great-nephew Ko Hung in the next century became one of the most celebrated writers on the various technical means for attaining immortality. In his major work, the Pao-p'u-tzu ("He Who Holds to Simplicity"), Ko Hung expounded the alchemical formulas received and transmitted by Ko Hsüan. In so doing, he took care to distinguish the divinely inspired "gold elixir" (chin-tan), or "liquefied gold" (chin-i)-- i.e., preparations of true edible, or potable, gold, the consumption of which leads to immortality (aurifaction)--from the mere counterfeiting of the precious substance, with intention to deceive (aurifiction). These alchemical methods have been designated as belonging to the T'ai ch'ing (Great Purity) tradition, from the name of the heaven of the Immortals to which the elixirs were said to elevate their consumer. The chapters of alchemy in the Pao-p'u-tzu are among the earliest documents to describe the art in detail.

Ko Hung enumerated an extensive selection of material substances and practical operations to which he attributed varying degrees of relative efficacy in the prolongation of life. Dietetics (grain and alcohol avoidance), ingestion of solar, lunar, and astral exhalations and their cycling within the body, gymnastics, and conservation of vital fluids through proper sexual techniques were all necessary and fundamental. The usefulness of written talismans and the performance of good works were also not denied. Above all, it was essential that all disease be eliminated from the body before undertaking more positive, specialized practices for achieving immortality. Herbs and plants were useful not only against disease, but in many cases (particularly in that of mushrooms) their use resulted in definite lengthening of life. For a definitive transformation into
an immortal (hsien), with all the powers and prerogatives that implied, however, an alchemical elixir must be compounded and consumed. Ko Hung admitted, however, that he himself had never succeeded in making one. After a strenuous life in civil and military service, in the course of which he managed to write voluminously on many subjects, this great eclectic scholar is said to have undertaken a long journey to China's colonial dominions in Vietnam in quest of the pure cinnabar found there. He stopped at Lo-fou Shan, near Canton, however, where he died.

The Pao-p'u-tzu was nearly finished in 317, when Loyang, capital of the Western Chin dynasty, fell to the Hsiung-nu. This event set off a considerable emigration to the unsubdued region south of the Yangtze River. The Imperial household was followed in its flight by numerous high-ranking dependents and their spiritual ministers. During this period the Way of the Celestial Masters, established at the court of Lo-yang since the early 3rd century, apparently first penetrated in force to the Southeast. While the secular, military menace remained in the North, and factional struggles raged among the emigrants, the Way of the Celestial Masters waged unremitting war against the indigenous sects and cults of demons of the Southeast. Many of the old established families, settled in the region since the end of the Han dynasty, turned away from local traditions to become members of the Taoist faith of their new political superiors. At first these converts were content to entrust the direction of their spiritual lives to the libationers of the movement, though these religious specialists were generally men of lower social standing than themselves. Among the second and third generation of converts from the old aristocracy of Wu, however, new and original impulses, which were to have most profound effects upon the development of Taoism as a whole, began to occur.

The Mao Shan Revelations

The most brilliant synthesis of the Way of the Celestial Masters with the indigenous traditions of the Southeast occurred in the 4th century AD in a family closely related to Ko Hung. Hsü Mi, an official at the Imperial court, and his youngest son, Hsü Hui, were the principal beneficiaries of an extensive new Taoist revelation. A visionary in the Hsüs' service, Yang Hsi, was honoured with the visits of a group of perfected immortals (chen-jen) from the heaven of Shang-ch'ing (Supreme Purity), an improvement on the T'ai-ch'ing heaven and the ordinary immortals (hsien) that peopled it. In the course of his visions, which lasted from AD 364 to 370, Yang received a whole new scriptural and hagiographic literature, in addition to much practical information from the "perfected" (chen) on how it was to be understood and employed. Like the Ko family, the Hsüs belonged to the old aristocracy of Wu, who had been displaced from prominence by the arrival of the great families of the North, to whose Taoist beliefs they had been converted. The perfected assured them that the present unjust order was soon to end and that the rule of men on earth was to be replaced by a universal Taoist imperium. The present (i.e., the 4th century) was a time of trials, given over to the reign of the demonic Six Heavens, and marked by war, disease, and the worship of false gods. The sole mission of the demonic forces, however, was to cleanse the earth of evildoers, a task that would be completed by an overwhelming cataclysm of fire and flood. At that time the Good would take refuge deep in the earth, in the luminous caverns of the perfected beneath such sacred mountains as Mao Shan (in Kiang-su Province), the immediate focus of spiritual interest for the Hsüs. There they would complete the study of immortality already begun in their lifetimes, so as to be ready for the descent from heaven of the new universal ruler, Lord Li Hung, the "sage who is to come" (housheng). This was prophesied for the year 392. Yang and the Hsüs would get high office in the heaven of Shang ch'ing and rule over a newly constituted earth, peopled by the elect (chung-min).

Yang Hsi's prodigious genius gave great consistency and consummate literary form to his comprehensive synthesis of many spiritual traditions. Popular messianism was adapted to provide an encompassing framework and temporal cogency. Yang and his patrons, however, were also thoroughly familiar with Buddhist thought. In addition to integrating Buddhist concepts into their Taoist system, the perfected also dictated a "Taoicized" version of large portions of an early Buddhist compilation, the Sutra in Forty-two Sections (Ssu-shih-erh chang Ching). Buddhist
notions of predestination and reincarnation were subtly blended with native Chinese beliefs in hereditary character traits and the clan as a single unit involving mutual responsibility on the part of all its members, living and dead. Furthermore, building upon the Way of the Celestial Masters, the Mao Shan revelations envisaged some reform of the practices of the parent sect. Its sexual rites in particular were stigmatized as inferior practices, more conducive to perdition than to salvation. In place of this, a spiritualized union with a celestial partner was apparently realized by Yang Hsi and promised to his patrons. Other rituals of the Celestial Masters were allowed to continue in use among the Mao Shan adepts but were relegated to a subordinate position. Thus, the movement did not reject but rather incorporated and transcended the older tradition.

Though the perfected inveighed against the popular cults, even elements of these were absorbed and transformed. There is some evidence that, before Yang's inspired writings, Lord Mao himself, the august perfected immortal who gave his name to the mountain, was no more than a local minor god worshipped by an exorcistic priestess in the shadow of Mao Shan. Among the more learned traditions, alchemy received particular attention, being adopted for the first time into the context of organized religious Taoism. The perfected revealed the highly elaborate formulas of several of the elixirs that served them as food and drink. For all their extravagance, they were intended as real chemical preparations and described as being deadly poisonous to mortals. By preparing and ingesting one of them, the younger Hsü probably willingly ended his earthly existence in order to take up the post that had been offered him in the unseen world and to make ready for the coming of the new era.

**The Ling Pao scriptures and liturgies**

Another member of the Ko family was responsible for the second great Taoist scriptural tradition. Ko Ch'ao-fu began composing the Ling pao Ching ("Classic of the Sacred Jewel") c. AD 397. He claimed that they had been first revealed to his own ancestor, the famous Ko Hsüan, early in the 3rd century. In these works the Tao is personified in a series of "celestial worthies" (t'ien-tsun), its primordial and uncreated manifestations. These in turn were worshipped by means of a group of liturgies, which, during the 5th century, became supreme in Taoist practice, completely absorbing the older, simpler rites of the Way of the Celestial Masters. As each celestial worthy represented a different aspect of the Tao, so each ceremony of worship had a particular purpose, which it attempted to realize by distinct means. The rites as a whole were called chai ("retreat"), from the preliminary abstinence obligatory on all participants. They lasted a day and a night or for a fixed period of three, five, or seven days; the number of persons taking part was also specified, centring on a sacerdotal unit of six officiants. One's own salvation was inseparable from that of his ancestors; the Huang-lu chai (Retreat of the Yellow Register) was directed towards the salvation of the dead. Chin-lu chai (Retreat of the Golden Register), on the other hand, was intended to promote auspicious influences on the living. The T'u-t'an chai (Mud and Soot Retreat, or Retreat of Misery) was a ceremony of collective contrition, with the purpose of fending off disease, the punishment of sin, by prior confession; in Chinese civil law, confession resulted in an automatic reduction or suspension of sentence. These and other rituals were accomplished for the most part in the open, within a specially delimited sacred area, or altar (t'an), the outdoor complement of the oratory. The chanted liturgy, innumerable lamps, and clouds of billowing incense combined to produce in the participants a cathartic experience that assured these ceremonies a central place in all subsequent Taoist practices.

**The great Southern masters**

Though Taoism never became the exclusive state religion in the South, its most eminent representatives founded powerful organizations that received considerable official support. Lu
Hsiu-ching in the 5th century epitomized the Ling Pao tradition, the liturgies of which he codified. His establishment at the great Buddho-Taoist centre, Lu Shan (in Kiangsi Province), carried out ceremonies and provided auspicious portents in favour of the Liu-Sung dynasty (420-479), in whose rulers Taoists complacently agreed to recognize the fulfillment of the old messianic prophesies and the legitimate continuation of the Han dynasty. Lu was frequently invited to the capital (present-day Nanking), where the Ch’ung-hsü Kuan (Abbey) was founded for him and served as the focal point of the Ling Pao movement.

Like Lu, who was a member of the old aristocracy of Wu, T’ao Hung-ching of the 5th and 6th centuries enjoyed even greater renown as the most eminent Taoist master of his time. He spent years in searching out the manuscript legacy of Yang Hsi and the Hsüs, and in 492 retired to Mao Shan, where he edited and annotated the revealed texts and attempted to re-create their practices in their original setting. T’ao's fame as a poet, calligrapher, and natural philosopher has persisted throughout Chinese history; he is perhaps best known as the founder of critical pharmacology. T’ao was an intimate friend of the great Liang emperor Wu Ti (of the 6th century), and his Mao Shan establishment was able to survive the proscription of all other Taoist sects in 504. Though whole Taoist families lived under T’ao’s spiritual rule at Mao Shan, he himself stressed the need for celibacy and full-time commitment to the work of the Tao. In his state-sponsored Chu-yang Kuan, T’ao appears to have effected a working synthesis of the public rites of the Ling Pao liturgies with the private and individual practices enjoined in the Mao Shan revelations. This dual practice was to remain a feature of all subsequent Taoist sects. T’ao’s primary interest, however, was in the scriptures of the perfected of Shang-ch’ing; and this is reflected in the revelations vouchsafed by these same spiritual agents to a 19-year-old disciple of T’ao’s, Chou Tzu-liang, in 515-516. These revelations show a pronounced Buddhist influence, and T’ao was himself reputed to be a master of Buddhist as well as Taoist doctrine. His writings evidence a complete familiarity with Buddhist literature, and it is reported that both Buddhist monks and Taoist priests officiated at his burial rites.

**State Taoism in the North**

Under the foreign rulers of North China, independent developments likewise were in progress. In 415, one K'ou Ch'ien-chih received a revelation from Lao-chün himself. According to this new dispensation, K'ou was designated celestial master and ordered to undertake a total reformation of Taoism. Not only were all popular messianic movements claiming to represent Lao-chün unsparingly condemned but K'ou's mission was particularly aimed at the elimination of abuses from the Way of the Celestial Masters itself. Sexual rites and the taxes contributed to the support of the priesthood were the principal targets of the god's denunciations; "What have such matters to do with the pure Tao?" he irately demanded. The proposed reform was far more radical than that foreseen in the Mao Shan revelations of the Southeast, and K’ou was given concrete temporal power of a sort that the Hsüs had not envisaged. Political and economic factors favoured the acceptance of his message at court; Emperor T'ai Wu Ti (5th century) of the Northern Wei dynasty put K'ou in charge of religious affairs within his dominions and proclaimed Taoism the official religion of the empire. The Emperor considered himself to reign as the terrestrial deputy of the deified Lao-tzu, as is indicated by the name of one of the periods of his reign: T'ai-p'ing Chenchün (Perfect Lord of the Great Peace). The dominant position of Taoism under the Northern Wei, however, apparently did not long survive K’ou Ch’ien-chih's death in 448.

**Taoism under the T'ang, Sung, And later dynasties**

**Taoism under the T'ang dynasty (618-907)**
China's reunification under the T'ang marked the beginning of Taoism's most spectacular success. The dynasty's founder, Li Yüan, claimed to be descended from the Lao-tzu; as his power increased, even the influential Mao Shan Taoists came to accept him as the long-deferred fulfillment of messianic prophecy. This notion was built into the dynasty's state ideology, and the emperor was commonly referred to as the "sage" (sheng). Prospective candidates for the civil service were examined in either the Ling Pao "Classic of Salvation" (Tu-jen Ching) or the Mao Shan "Classic of the Yellow Court" (Huang-t'ing Ching). Under a series of celebrated patriarchs, the Mao Shan organization dominated the religious life of the age. One of the greatest of the line, Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen, initiated innumerable government officials and eminent men of letters and served as spiritual master to emperors. The personnel of the Mao Shan revelations even entered into the formal framework of state religion. When Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen pointed out that the sacred peaks of the Imperial cult were in reality under the superintendence of the perfected of Shang-ch'ing, officially sponsored shrines were erected to them there; and their propitiation was incorporated into the traditional rites.

The wide diffusion of Taoism throughout the vast T'ang empire is reflected by the sizable proportion of Taoist texts discovered in the walled-up caves at Tun-huang (in Kansu Province). This town in the far west of China was the gateway to Central Asia; and here Taoists came into contact not only with Buddhists of many different doctrinal persuasions but also with Nestorian Christians and Manichaeans. Copies of the Lao-tzu were sent to the King of Tibet, and the book was translated into Sanskrit at the request of the ruler of Kashmir. It also reached Japan in the 7th century, as did texts of religious Taoism; reports of Taoism's dominance on the continent may still be read in the diaries of Japanese Buddhist pilgrims. The geographic extension of the religion at this time was also represented, in the legendary sphere, by the systematic elaboration of its sacred mountains and the traditions attaching to each of them. They are described by the great hagiographer, Tu Kuang-t'ing, at the end of the T'ang dynasty. In addition to the great "cavern-heavens" (tung-t'ien), 10 holy mountains known to the original Mao Shan revelations, he lists 36 lesser cavern heavens and 72 sanctuaries (fu-ti). Situated throughout the length and breadth of the empire, they are fitting spiritual guideposts across the dominions of the T'ang, which saw itself as an essentially Taocratic realm.

**Taoism under the Sung and Yüan dynasties**

**Internal developments**

The Sung (960-1279) and Yüan (1206-1368) periods witnessed a great religious effervescence, stimulated in part, under the Sung, by the menace of foreign invasion and, during the Yüan, by Tantric (esoteric, or occultic) Buddhism that was in vogue among the new Mongol rulers of China. During the preceding centuries the Way of the Celestial Masters, centred at Lung-hu Shan (Dragon-Tiger Mountain, Kiang-si), had been eclipsed by the prestige of Mao Shan. At the end of the Northern Sung period, the 30th celestial master, Chang Chi-hsien, was four times summoned to court by the Sung emperor Hui Tsung, who hoped for spiritual support for his threatened reign. Chang Chi-hsien was credited with a renovation of the ancient sect, thereafter called the Way of Orthodox Unity (Cheng-i Tao), and with the introduction of the influential rites of the "five thunders" (wu-lei) into Taoist liturgy.

After the retreat of the Sung government south of the Yangtze River (1126), a number of new Taoist sects were founded in the occupied North and soon attained impressive dimensions. Among them were: the T'ai-i (Supreme Unity) sect, founded c. 1140 by Hsiao Pao-chen; the Chen-ta Tao (Perfect and Great Tao) sect of Liu Te-jen (1142); and the Ch'üan-chen (Perfect Realization) sect, founded in 1163 by Wang Ch'ung-yang (Wang Che). This last sect came to the favourable
attention of the Mongols, who had taken over in the North, and its second patriarch, Ch’iu Ch’ang-ch’ün, was invited into Central Asia to preach to Genghis Khan. The sect enjoyed great popularity, and its establishments of celibate monks continued to be active into the 20th century, with the famous White Cloud Monastery (Po-yün Kuan) at Peking as headquarters. In the South, Mao Shan continued to prosper, while the Ko-tsao sect flourished at the mountain of that name, in Kiangsi Province. This was said to be the spot where the 3rd century immortal, Ko Hsüan, had ascended to heaven; the sect looked to him as its founder, and it transmitted the Ling Pao scriptures, which he was believed to have been the first to receive.

**Literary developments**

As early as c. 570, the need for a comprehensive collection of information on all the schools had resulted in the first great Taoist encyclopaedia. Like other such works in China, it was made up of extracts from sundry books, classified by subject matter. The compilation of similar reference works flourished during the Sung and Yüan periods. The most important is the Seven Slips from the Bookbag of the Clouds (Yün-chi ch’i-ch’ien) (c. 1022), made just after the first printing of the Taoist Canon in about 1016. It is a canon in miniature and contains many important works in their entirety. Hagiography continued to thrive. In addition to many local and sectarian compilations, there were huge general collections, containing the lives of both legendary and historical figures, such as the immense Comprehensive Mirror of the Immortals (Chen-hsien t‘ung-chien; early 12th century). Sectarian historiography also developed; of particular interest are the extensive monographs devoted to the great mountain centres of Taoism. The Treatise on Mao Shan (Mao Shan chih) (1329) is among the most monumental. It includes lives of the saints and patriarchs, notes on topography and history, and a valuable selection from 1,000 years of literary testimony and inscriptions on the mountain and its Taoism. The new Taoist movements, which took northern China by storm in the 12th and 13th centuries, also furnish their own very copious literature: biographies of their masters and collections of their sayings. Among them is the famous account of the travels (1220-24) of a patriarch of the Ch’üan-chen sect into Central Asia in response to the summons of Genghis Khan. Short moral tracts for missionary purposes were yet another popular genre, and, finally, there are innumerable inscriptions from all periods that provide important data on Taoist establishments and their patrons over the centuries.

**Alchemical developments**

While learned specialists continued to refine alchemical theory, the period witnessed increasing interest in internal alchemy (nei tan), in which the language of the laboratory was used to describe operations realized within the body. This, in a sense, was nothing new. Alchemical metaphors had very early been applied to physiology; Ko Hung, for example, called semen the "Yin elixir." By Sung times, however, the systematic interiorization and sublimation of alchemy had become so widespread that all earlier texts of operative, external alchemy (wai tan) were henceforth supposed to have really been written about nei tan, and the attempt to compound a tangible chemical elixir was thought to have been no more than a hoax. Liturgy also provided its own sublimation of the older art: the lien-tu ("salvation by smelting") funeral service was developed at this time, in which an "elixir of immortality" was compounded of written talismans and offered to the deceased.

**Syncretism**
With such prestigious examples as Ch'an Buddhism (emphasizing intuitive meditation) and Neo-Confucianism (emphasizing knowledge and reason) before them, Taoists did not long delay in constructing interesting syntheses of their own and other beliefs. Confucianism now joined Buddhism as a fertile source of inspiration. The revelations of Hsü Sun, supposed to have lived in the 4th century AD, to one Ho Chen-kung in 1131 inspired the "Pure and Luminous Way of Loyalty and Filial Obedience" (Ching-ming Chung-hsiao Tao). This sect preached the Confucian cardinal virtues as being essential for salvation, and consequently won a considerable following in conservative intellectual and official circles. Another highly popular syncretistic movement of Taoist origin was that of the Three Religions (San Chiao). Its composite moral teachings are represented by popular tracts, the so-called "books on goodness" (shan-shu), which have been in extremely wide circulation since the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).

**Developments outside the official current**

**Communal folk Taoism (shen chiao)**

Popular, or folk, religion is not a separate religious tradition but the wholly unorganized undercurrent of Chinese religious culture from the earliest times, shared by all strata of society. The Chinese have no single name for it; it may be called the religion of the gods, or spirits (shen chiao). The deities of the popular pantheon come from all traditions. What the deities have in common is that in shen chiao they are all gods intimately involved in everyday life as givers of blessings or bringers of calamities. Every object or activity of daily life has its presiding spirit that has to be consulted and feasted or appeased and driven off, especially at all special occasions in the life of the family or the community. The person primarily involved in the practice of shen chiao in modern times is the fa shih (magician). For the orthodox Taoist priests the shen chiao rites are the "little rites"; the chiao rituals, the exclusive function of the Taoist priests, are the "great rites." Both kinds of priests--the orthodox and the magicians--operate on different occasions in the same temples and are consulted for the family rites of burial, birth, marriage, house construction, and business affairs.

Major exorcism rites (e.g., purification of haunted houses and treatment of the sick or mentally deranged) are performed by the orthodox Taoist priests, who, being ordained into the ranks of the shen, have power over the demons with whom they are on an equal footing. The fa shih priest's specific function is the manipulation of possessed mediums (specially gifted lay persons). The medium puts himself into a trance in which he becomes the mouthpiece of a deity (or a deceased relative) giving medical, personal, or business advice that is interpreted by the fa shih. Professional mediums attached to a temple or a private cult lacerate themselves in trances. This is considered to be a vicarious atonement for the community during the great feasts. A different form of mediumistic communication among lay people is automatic writing, either with a brush on paper or with a stick on sand.

**Secret societies**

Politically dissident messianic movements have existed and developed separately from the established Taoist church from the very beginning (2nd century AD). Their leaders were priest-shamans, similar to the modern fa shih priests of folk Taoism. Their followers were the semiliterate or illiterate classes socially below the tradition of orthodox Taoism, and their organization was similar to that of the syncretistic religions and of modern secret societies.
Although the secret societies have had no organizational contact with the Taoist tradition for centuries, their religious beliefs, practices, and symbols contain some Taoist elements, such as initiation rites, worship of Taoist deities, mediumism, and the use of charms and amulets for invulnerability. These influences reached them either directly or through popular religion.

Influence

Taoism and Chinese culture

Taoist contributions to Chinese science

Taoist physiological techniques have, in themselves, no devotional character. They have the same preoccupations as physicians: to preserve health and to prolong physical life. Medicine developed independently from about the 1st century AD, but many Taoist faith healers and hygienists added to medical knowledge.

The earliest surviving medical book, the Huang Ti nei Ching, or "The Yellow Emperor's Esoteric Classic" (3rd century BC?), presents itself as the teachings of a legendary Celestial Master addressed to the Yellow Emperor.

Experiments with minerals, plants, and animal substances, inspired to some extent by Taoist dietetics and by the search for the elixir of life, resulted in the 52 chapters of pharmacopoeia called Pen-ts'ao kang-mu, or "Great Pharmacopoeia" (16th century).

This interest in science is considered a reflection of the Taoist emphasis on direct observation and experience of the nature of things, as opposed to Confucian reliance on the authority of tradition. Chuang-tzu declared that tradition tells what was good for a bygone age but not what is good for the present.

The Taoist secret of efficacy is to follow the nature of things; this does not imply scientific experimentation but rather a sensitivity and skill obtained by "minute concentration on the Tao running through natural objects of all kinds." This knowledge and skill cannot be handed down but is that which the men of old took with them when they died (Chuang-tzu). The image for it is the skill of the artisan admired by the Taoists in their numerous parables on wheelwrights, meatcutters, sword makers, carvers, animal tamers, and musicians.

Though extolling the intuitive comprehension and skillful handling of matter, the Taoists did not observe nature in the Western sense and rejected technology out of their aversion to the artificial. Any new idea or discovery in China was phrased as "what the old masters really meant." This ideology of rediscovery makes it hard to study the evolution of scientific thought. Some progress over the ages (for example, in alchemy) can be seen, but the Taoist contribution to Chinese science might be smaller than it has been assumed.

Taoist imagery

Taoist literature manifests such richness and variety that scholars tend naturally to seek the symbolic modes of expression that served as points of unity within its historical diversity. No image is more fundamental to all phases of Taoism than that of the child. Tao-te Ching praises the infant's closeness to the Tao in its freedom from outside impressions, and Chuang-tzu
describes the spiritual beings nurtured on primal substances, air and dew, as having the faces of children. Thus many of the spirits, both indwelling and celestial, in the esoteric system are described as resembling newborn babes, while the Immortals who appear in visions, though hundreds of years old, are at most adolescent in appearance. Other persistent images are those of mountain and cavern. Present in the older texts, they are carried over, with particular connotations, into the later works. The mountain as a meeting place of heaven and earth, gods and men, and master and disciple (as already in Chuang-tzu), takes on a vast downward extension. Beneath the mountains are the great "Cavern-heavens" (tung-t'ien) of esoteric Taoism, staffed by a numerous immortal hierarchy. Thus, for example, while Mao Shan is only some 400 metres (1,300 feet) high to the gaze of the profane, the initiate knows that its luminous grottoes plunge thousands of metres into the earth. And light is everywhere in Taoist revelation: spirits and paradises alike gleam with brilliance unknown in the world of men.

Influence on secular literature

Already during the Warring States period and the early Han, Taoism had made its appearance in the works of the other schools. Both direct quotations and patent imitations were frequent, and citations from Tao-te Ching and Chuang-tzu abound throughout later Chinese literature, as do reminiscences of both their style and their content. Esoteric Taoist writings, too, held great fascination for men of letters. Their response might vary from a mere mention of the most celebrated Immortals to whole works inspired directly by specific Taoist texts and practices. Many a poet recorded his search, real or metaphorical, for Immortals or transcendent herbs or described his attempts at compounding an elixir. A certain number of technical terms became touchstones of poetic diction. The revealed literature of Mao Shan came to have the greatest effect on secular writings. As works of great literary refinement, the Lives of the Perfected directly inspired a very famous tale, the Intimate Life of Emperor Wu of Han (Han Wu Ti nei-chuan; late 6th century), which in highly polished terms describes the visit to the emperor of a goddess, the Queen Mother of the West. This work, in turn, made a decisive contribution to the development of T'ang romantic fiction. Literary accounts of fantastic marvels also drew heavily on the wonders of Mao Shan hagiography and topography. The Mao Shan influence on T'ang poetry was no less important. Precise references to the literature of the sect abound in the poems of the time, while many of the greatest poets, such as Li Po, were formally initiated into the Mao Shan organization. As awareness of these influences increases, scholars are faced with the intriguing question of the possible religious origins of whole genres of Chinese literature (see also Chinese Literature).

Influence on the visual arts

A number of early Chinese books of spiritual interest claim to have been inspired by pictures seen on the walls of local temples. A similar tradition attaches to the Lives of the Immortals, which is said to derive from a pictorial work called Portraits of the Immortals. As has been noted, the Immortals were depicted on Han mirrors. Other illustrative materials were in close relation to the earliest esoteric Taoist literature. Graphic guides existed from early times to aid in the identification of sacred minerals and plants, particularly mushrooms. A later specimen of such a work is to be found in the Taoist Canon. This practical aspect of Taoist influence resulted in the exceptionally high technical level of botanical and mineralogical drawing that China soon attained. In calligraphy, too, Taoists soon set the highest standard. One of the greatest of all calligraphers, Wang Hsi-chih (303-361), was an adherent of the Way of the Celestial Master, and one of his most renowned works was a transcription of the Book of the Yellow Court. The efficacy of talismans, in particular, depended on the precision of the strokes from which they were created. Figure painting was another field in which Taoists excelled. China's celebrated painter Ku K'ai-chih, a practicing Taoist, left an essay containing directions for painting a scene in the life of the first Celestial Master, Chang Tao-ling. Many works on Taoist themes, famous in their time but now lost, have been attributed to other great early masters. Of these, some may have been painted for use in ritual, and religious paintings of the Taoist pantheon are still produced today. The Taoist
scriptures, with their instructions for visualization of the spiritual hierarchy, including details of apparel and accoutrements, are ready-made painter's manuals. Finally, the language of speculative Taoism was pressed into service as the basic vocabulary of Chinese aesthetics. Consequently, many secular artists attempted to express their own conceptions of the "natural spontaneity" of Chuang-tzu and Lao-tzu's "spirit of the valley." Here Taoism found still wider imaginative extension, and the efforts of these painters are embodied in those magnificent landscapes that have come to be thought of as most characteristically Chinese.

**Taoism and other religions**

**Confucianism and Buddhism**

Confucianism is concerned with human society and the social responsibilities of its members; Taoism emphasizes nature and what is natural and spontaneous in man. The two traditions, "within society" and "beyond society," balance and complement each other. This classic definition is generally correct concerning orthodox Han Confucianism; it neglects some aspects of Confucian thought, such as the speculations on the I Ching, that are considered to be among the Confucian Classics and the prophetic occult (ch'an-wei) commentaries to the classics. As far as Taoism is concerned, this definition neglects the social thought of the Taoist philosophers and the political aspects of Taoist religion. Chinese Buddhism has been viewed not as a Sinified Indian religion but as flowers on the tree of Chinese religions that blossomed under Indian stimulus and that basically maintained their Chinese character.

The first mention of Buddhism in China (AD 65) occurs in a Taoist context, at the court of a member of the Imperial family known for his devotion to the doctrines of Huang-Lao. The Indian religion was at first regarded as a foreign variety of Taoism; the particular Buddhist texts chosen to be translated during the Han period reveal the Taoist preoccupation of the earliest converts with rules of conduct and techniques of meditation. Early translators employed Taoist expressions as equivalents for Buddhist technical terms. Thus, the Buddha, in achieving enlightenment (bodhi), was described as having "obtained the Tao"; the Buddhist saints (arhat) become perfected immortals (chen-jen); and "non-action" (wu-wei) was used to render nirvana (the Buddhist state of bliss). A joint sacrifice to Lao-tzu and the Buddha was performed by the Han emperor in AD 166. During this period occurred the first reference to the notion that Lao-tzu, after vanishing into the west, became the Buddha. This theory enjoyed a long and varied history. It claimed that Buddhism was a debased form of Taoism, designed by Lao-tzu as a curb on the violent natures and vicious habits of the "western barbarians," and as such was entirely unsuitable for Chinese consumption. A variant theory even suggested that, by imposing celibacy on Buddhist monks, Lao-tzu intended the foreigners' extinction. In approximately AD 300, the Taoist scholar Wang Fou composed a "Classic of the Conversion of the Barbarians" (Hua hu Ching), which was altered and expanded in subsequent centuries to encompass new developments in the continuing debate. Although there is no evidence that the earliest Taoist organization, literature, or ceremonies were in any way indebted to Buddhism, by the 4th century there was a distinct Buddhist influence upon the literary form of Taoist scriptures and the philosophical expression of the most eminent Taoist masters.

The process of interaction, however, was a mutual one, Taoism participating in the widening of thought because of the influence of a foreign religion and Buddhism undergoing a partial "Taoicization" as part of its adaptation to Chinese conditions. The Buddhist contribution is particularly noticeable in the developing conceptions of the afterlife; Buddhist ideas of purgatory had a most striking effect not only on Taoism but especially on Chinese popular religion. On a more profound level the ultimate synthesis of Taoism and Buddhism was realized in the Ch'an (Japanese Zen) tradition (from the 7th century on), into which the paradoxes of the ancient
Taoist mystics were integrated. Likewise, the goal of illumination in a single lifetime, rather than at the end of an indefinite succession of future existences, was analogous to the religious Taoist's objective of immortality as the culmination of his present life.

Ch'an Buddhism deeply influenced Neo-Confucianism, the renaissance of Confucian philosophy in Sung times (960-1279), which in Chinese is called "Learning of the Tao" (Tao Hsüeh). In this movement Confucianism acquired a universal dimension beyond a concern for society. Neo-Confucian thought often seems as Taoist as the so-called Neo-Taoist philosophy and literature seem Confucian.

As early as the T'ang dynasty, there are traces of the syncretism of the "Three Religions" (San Chiao), which became a popular movement in Sung and Ming China. A mixture of Confucian ethics, the Taoist system of merits, and the Buddhist concept of reincarnation produced such "books on goodness" (shan-shu) as the Kan ying p'ien ("Tract on Actions and Retributions"). The school of the "Three Religions" was rejected by most Confucians and Buddhists but received wide support in Taoist circles. Many Taoist masters of those periods transmitted nei tan and other techniques of inner cultivation to their disciples while at the same time preaching the moralism of the "Three Religions" to outsiders.

Other Asian religions

The affinities of Taoism with other Asian religions are numerous. If one distinguishes between universal religions of salvation, such as Buddhism and Islam, and the older, more culture-bound religions, such as Japanese Shinto and Hinduism, Taoism undoubtedly belongs to the second category.

The fact that no record of Shinto antedates the introduction of Chinese script makes it difficult to distinguish between Taoist affinities and influences on Shinto features, such as the cult of holy mountains, the representation of the human soul as a bird, bird dances, the representation of the world of the dead as a paradisiac country of immortality, and the concept of the vital force (tama, in objects as well as in man). Like Taoism, Shinto is the religion of the village community.

There was never an attempt to implant a Taoist religion officially in Japan, but a random choice of Taoist beliefs and customs have, at various ages, been adopted and transformed at the Japanese court, in the temples, and among the people. Records from the early 7th century contain traces of Taoism, which was appreciated chiefly for its magical claims. The "masters of Yin and Yang" (ommyo-ji), a caste of diviners learned in the I Ching, Chinese astrology, and occult sciences who assumed importance at court in the Heian period (8th-12th century), probably were responsible for the introduction of Taoist practices, such as the Keng-shen (Japanese Koshin) vigil and the observance of directional taboos (katatagae). In the 8th century, disputations were held at court over Buddhism and the philosophy of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. The Pao-p'u-tzu was known, and Kobo Daishi, the founder of Shingon Buddhism, reported (in 797) on Taoist physiological practices and beliefs in immortals. Buddhist (Shingon and Tendai) ascetics, wandering healers, and mountain hermits known as yamabushi probably came closest to Taoism in their techniques for prolonging life (abstinence from grains, etc.) and their magical arts (exorcisms, sword dance) and objects (mirrors, charms), which must have reached them through the Tantric elements in Shingon. Taoist mysticism lives on in that it has influenced the two Chinese Zen schools of Lin-chi (Rinzai) and Ts'ao-tung (Soto), introduced in the 12th and 13th centuries and still active in Japan. Popular Taoist moral tracts were printed and widely diffused in the Tokugawa period. Modern Japanese scholarship on Taoism (Dokyo) ranks very high in the world.

Western mysticism and religions
The similarity of mysticism in all religions points to the fact that there is only one Inner Way, the experience of which is expressed differently in the respective cultural and religious environments. Lao-tzu's notion of "the One," which is not only primordial unity but the oneness underlying all phenomena, the point in which all contraries are reconciled, was spoken of by such Western mystics as Plotinus, a 3rd-century-AD Greek philosopher, and Nicholas of Cusa, a 15th-century French philosopher.

Taoism, like all other forms of Eastern mysticism, distinguishes itself from Western mysticism by its conscious techniques of mind and body designed to induce trance and to give access to mystical experience. These disciplines of learning to "sit in forgetfulness" are akin to Plotinus' concern to "be deaf to the sounds of the senses and keep the soul's faculty of apprehension one-pointed" and to the 16th-century Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila's state where "the soul is fully awake as regards God, but wholly asleep as regards things of this world and in respect of herself." Lao-tzu's strangely sober and abstract descriptions of ecstatic union with the Tao have been compared to the medieval German mystic Meister Eckeharts' "still desert of the Godhead" and his pupil Heinrich Suso's union of the essence of the soul with "the essence of Nothingness." One instance of Western physiological techniques is the Hesychasts, a sect of Greek Orthodox mystics on Mt. Athos in the 14th century who used respiratory practices and concentration on internal organs to prepare for the mental "Jesus prayer."

Taoism in modern times

The principal refuge of Taoism in the 20th century is on Taiwan. Its establishment on the island is doubtless contemporary with the great emigration from the opposite mainland province of Fukien in the 17th and 18th centuries. The religion, however, has received new impetus since the 63rd celestial master, Chang En-pu, took refuge there in 1949. On Taiwan, Taoism may still be observed in its traditional setting, distinct from the manifestations of popular religion that surround it. Hereditary Taoist priests (Taiwanese sai-kong), called "blackheads" (wu t'ou) from their headgear, are clearly set off from the exorcists (fa-shih) or "redheads" (hung-t'ou) of the ecstatic cults. Their lengthy rites are still held, now known under the term chiao ("offering"), rather than the medieval chai ("retreat"). The liturgy chanted, in expanded Sung form, still embodies elements that can be traced back to Chang Tao-ling's sect. The religion has enjoyed a renaissance since the 1960s, with great activity being carried on in temple building and restoration. The most significant event in the past several centuries of Taoist history, however, probably is the ordination (in 1964) in Taiwan of a Dutch scholar, K.M. Schipper, as a Taoist priest. His systematic, first-hand researches into Taoist practices may very well revolutionize scholarly knowledge of the religion, which will thus acquire an unforeseen historical extension, in the West and into the future.

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