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# Visualising the Historical Development and Belief System of Taoism

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**Abstract:** This paper visualises the historical development and belief system of Taoism. Taoism is an ancient Chinese philosophy and religion that instructs believers on living in harmony with the universe. Taoism has been connected to the philosopher Lao Tzu, who, around 500 B.C.E. wrote the main book of Taoism, the Tao Te Ching. Taoism holds that humans and animals should live in balance with the Tao, or the universe. Taoists believe in spiritual immortality, where the body's spirit joins the universe after death. The Tao Te Ching, or "The Way and Its Power," is a collection of poetry and sayings from around the third and fourth centuries B.C.E. guides Taoist thought and actions. The Tao (or Dao) is hard to define but is sometimes understood as the universe's way. Taoism teaches that all living creatures ought to live in a state of harmony with the universe, and the energy found in it. Ch'i, or qi, is the energy present in and guiding everything in the universe. Taoism became well-known in the eighth century C.E. as the religion of the Tang dynasty. It existed alongside Buddhism and Confucianism (another philosophical religion). However, during the Communist takeover in 1959, Taoism, Confucianism, and other religions were banned. This caused a decline in the practice of Taoism in China. Many modern Taoists live in Taiwan, although recent reforms in China have increased the number of Chinese Taoists. This paper gives a very concise and instrumental perspective about the historical inception, development, decline and recent happenings in Taoist communities across the globe. Follow through to learn more about Taoism and how they have shifted the timeline of history with their sentimental beliefs and practices.

**Keywords:** Taoism, Daoism, The way, Chinese religion, Tao and Te**DOI:** 10.53075/Ijmsirq/6657756765756

## A. INTRODUCTION

Taoism (or pinyin Daoism) is named after the concept of Tao (道 or pinyin Dao), which literally means "the Way" (Oldstone-Moore 2003, 6). Taoism, alongside with Confucianism and Buddhism, used to be one of the three main official religions of China (Hayes 2000, 195). Taoism saw a decline in the number of its adherents since the communist government took over China in 1949 (Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001, 191). When the Communist Party took power in China in 1949, many adherents of Taoism moved to Taiwan (Pas 2006, 34). The religion received new impetus when the 63rd celestial master, Zhang Enbu (張恩簿) took refuge Taiwan in 1949 (228). Taoism is also a vibrant religion in countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, which has large population of overseas Chinese. Taoism has entered many Asian cultures where there are Chinese and remains as part of Asian life (Halverson 1996, 216).

## B. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND BELIEF SYSTEM

Taoism has two forms: Philosophical Taoism and Religious Taoism. Philosophical Taoism is the form of Taoism in which its adherents follow the Tao of nature and choose to withdraw into the wildernesses, mountains and forests to meditate upon the order of nature (Chen 1998, 69; Morgan 2001, 221).

Religious Taoism, besides developing from Philosophical Taoism, has also incorporated thoughts and ideas from various sources such as the Yin-Yang School (阴阳), the Five Elements School (Wu-xing 五行) and, and its adherents tend to focus more on rites and rituals (Ching 1993, 102).

## 1. Development of Taoism

Most scholars attribute the founding of Taoism to Lao-Tzu (老子), the legendary contemporary of Confucius around third century BC. When religious Taoism became an organised religion in China, Lao-Tzu was revered as the founder (Chen 1998, 69). It is generally recognised that Taoism developed into two tracks: Philosophical Taoism (*Daojia* - school of Tao 道家) and Religious Taoism (*Daojiao* – religion of Tao 道教). Nevertheless, Lao-Tzu is till recognised and revered as the founder and contributor to both traditions.

### 1.1. Development of Philosophical Taoism

The early development of Philosophical Taoism can be traced to Lao-Tzu and his thoughts and ideas written in the *Tao Te Ching* (Ching 1993, 86). The focus of Lao-Tzu's thoughts is on following the unchanging laws of nature underlying the changes of things in the universe (人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然- "Ruler reflects the Earth; Earth reflects the Heavens; Heavens reflect the Way; the Way reflects what is") (Kline 2003, 36). One can turn everything to one's advantage by understanding these laws and regulating one's action in alignment with them (Fung 1948, 65). The text's significant contribution is the idea expressed by Chuang-Tzu (庄子), also in the third century BC, as recorded in the *Book of Chuang-Tzu*. In contrast to the thoughts of Lao-Tzu in *Tao Te Ching*, Chuang-Tzu was not concerned with society or government but focussed on the thoughts of the individual mind (Kohn 2008a, 1298). He encouraged people to enjoy life as long as it lasts, and with an attitude that is "free and easy" *xiaoyao* (逍遥) (1298). This is a form of "escape" not from society to retreat to the mountains and trees (Fung 1948, 66-67).

### 1.2 Development of Religious Taoism

Taoism became a religion towards the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 AD) (Ching 1993, 103). There were two reasons that gave rise to Religious Taoism. First, the adherents of Taoism saw the benefit of the setup of a religious organisation for the propagation of their belief system when they saw the organisation of Buddhism (Wong 2011, 3). Taoism did not have any kind of formal organisation till the second century AD. Second, the birth of Religious Taoism was driven by the hardship experienced by the people. At that time, China experienced many difficulties as a ruined political state. She was attacked by neighbouring countries and experienced natural calamities over many years (Moffett 1992, 288). The people could not understand why they had to suffer such calamities and were pessimistic about the future. Philosophical Taoism had not provided any explanation or solution to their dire situation. At this time, Religious Taoism came into the limelight. Beginning with Chang Tao Ling founder of the Heavenly Masters sect, Religious Taoism developed its own salvific promises as a means of redemption for the people (Ching 1993, 103; Wong 2011, 3). Religious Taoism began to develop its own core religious principles, such as the pantheon of deities and the pursuit of immortality to respond to the challenging issues of life.

#### [Teacher's Notes:

#### **The Revival of Philosophical Taoism: Neo-Taoism in the Third Century AD**

"Neo-Taoism" is a term given to a school of Taoism in the third and fourth century AD, known as *Hsüan Hsüeh* (玄学). The word "Hsüan" literally means "dark", "abstruse" or "mysterious". This period saw a revival of Taoist and divination texts, such as the *I Ching* (易经), over and above the Confucian classics, which had been dominant until then. The development of Neo-Taoism can be described as an intensification of philosophical discourse and a deepening and specification of philosophical concepts (Kohn 2008b, 1141). For example, the idea of the Tao was reinterpreted using the concept of *benwu* (本无) or "original non-being," which was defined as a state or force of the universe. The "free and easy wandering" (*xiaoyao* 逍遥) of Chuang-Tzu was described as a way to harmonise and align with one's inner nature (性) and destiny (命) which is the share (分) one has in the Tao (1141).

***The Later Development of Taoism (Fifth Century AD to the Modern Era)***

*Throughout the history of China, Taoism only flourish during those times when the emperors were favourable to it. Otherwise, it would face condemnation from the government. Taoism was the national religion in the founding of the Tang Dynasty, although there were periods of dispute between Buddhism and Taoism. The emperors of the succeeding Yuan and Ming dynasties also showed a considerable interest in Taoism, but Taoism suffered from relative indifference during the Qing dynasty (Barrett 1996, 100-101). Taoism's popularity declined in China after the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. During the rule of Kuomintang government, many Taoist heritage was also destroyed (Water 2002, 150). When the Communist ruled China in 1949, religious freedom was greatly curtailed. By 1960, "the several million Taoist monks were reduced to fewer than 50000" (150). It was during this period that the 37<sup>th</sup> Heavenly Master (天师) moved to Taiwan to avoid persecution (Morgan 2001, 255). During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the situation worsened. Many of the remaining Taoist heritage were destroyed by the Red Guards. Only until 1982, under Deng Xiaoping, was religious tolerance gradually restored (Water 2002, 150; Ching 1993, 102).]*

**2. Basic Tenets of Taoism**

The tenets of Philosophical Taoism and Religious Taoism are related and yet different. The former is more conceptual, and the latter is more ritualistic involving numerous deities, religious personnel, and scriptures. However, both branches of Taoism have their influence on the daily lives of the practitioners. This section will discuss the key tenets of Taoism which have major influence on the practices of Religious Taoism. The practices in Religious Taoism have their roots in Philosophical Taoism.

**2.1. Tao (道), the Way**

The term "Tao" literally means "the Way". The opening lines of Tao Te Ching first chapter says: "道可道，非恒道。名可名，非恒名" (The Way - cannot be told. The Name - cannot be named) (Kline 2003, 7). When one uses the term "Tao", one is merely giving Tao a name to facilitate one's discussion of Tao. In fact, Tao is unnameable. Tao transcends time and space and is beyond human understanding. Tao is self-existing (Fung 1948, 94-97; Morgan 2001, 225-227). Tao is the origin of the universe. Although Tao cannot be seen, heard, or touched, it is manifested in all things. Tao is the ultimate "Ground of Being" and the principle of order in the universe (Fung 1948, 94-97). Tao operates in the universe, heaven, and earth. It governs the life and changes in all things. To renew oneself, one must be enlightened by studying and understanding Tao, and then to live in tune with Tao (97-98).

**2.2 Te (德)**

"Te" may be defined as "virtue". Te as virtue refers to the conduct and attitude demonstrated by a person who is living according to Tao. The three most important virtues (Te) that the Taoists seek to cultivate are compassion (慈), frugality (俭), and humility (不敢为天下先) (Kline 2003, 88; Taoist Federation Singapore 2019). On the first virtue of compassion (慈), Taoists believe that the universe is nurtured in the Tao, and everything should flow with the compassionate and loving Tao. If one can cultivate the Tao with a kind and compassionate heart, the merits will increase (Taoist Federation Singapore 2019). The second virtue frugality (俭) is a Taoist tradition to uphold simplicity, and to avoid extravagance and waste (Taoist Federation Singapore 2019). The third virtue of humility (不敢为天下先) means "not presuming to be at the forefront in the world", which means that one should live harmoniously with others (Taoist Federation Singapore 2019). To cultivate these virtues, the Taoists should obey their elders, be tolerant, be loving to their parents, assist others and act in selfless ways (Water 2002, 151).

**2.3 Wuwei (无为)**

*Wuwei* literally means "non-action" (or inaction). However, it does not mean no action. Tao Te Ching says: "The Way is always inaction (无为), but nothing is left undone (无所不为)" (Kline 2003, 50). *Wuwei*, therefore, means to flow with Tao, instead of trying to struggle against or intervene in Tao (Morgan 2001, 233-234). To practise *wuwei* may not be as easy as it seems. Human beings should not fight with Tao, or to create our own structures and struggle against the ceaseless Tao. However, *wuwei* also does not mean complete absence of activity or doing nothing. What is meant here is that one simply restricts activity to that which is necessary and natural (Fung 1948, 100-101). The greatest advantage of *wuwei* is that it enables us to readily adjust to change. When one tries, one is struggling against the flow

of Tao and, thus, is inviting disaster. In fact, Taoists believe that the ability to flow with the Tao is a way to achieve immortality (Morgan 2001, 233-234).

#### 2.4 Qi (气)

Qi (气) is the vital principle or energy of life that creates the universe and resides in all things created (Pas 2006, 78). According to the Tao Te Ching, “道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物，万物负阴而抱阳，冲气以为和” (“The Way creates one: one creates two, two creates three, three creates every being, all beings carry the yin on their back, and embrace the yang in their arms, their gentleness achieves harmony”) (Kline 2003, 59). The interaction of the *qi* of *yin* and *yang* establishes *he* (和 harmony), so it gives birth to all things in the cosmos (Yan 2017, 46-47). From the interaction of *yin* and *yang* comes the formation of the Five Elements (五行) which bring forth all things in the universe (Pas 2006, 131).

#### 2.5 Yin-Yang (阴阳)

The Taoists believe that the Tao produces two opposite and yet balancing, interacting and interdependent forces within nature: the *yin* and the *yang* (Halverson 1996, 221). Everything in the world can be categorized into *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* are cosmic principles that exist in all things (Lee 1996, 25). Although *yin* and *yang* and the things that they signify are opposite to each other, they complement each other and are inclusive of each other. The figure below (the Tai Chi Tu 太极图) shows how *yin* and *yang* embrace and include each other.



**Figure 1. Tai Chi Tu 太极图**

#### [Teacher's Reference:

*In the figure, the circle is divided by the S-shaped line between yin (darkness or blackness) and yang (lightness or whiteness), symbolizing that yin embraces yang, and yang embraces yin. The dark side has a light dot in it, symbolising that yin has yang in it; and the light side has a dark dot, symbolizing that yang has yin in it. This signifies that yin and yang are not absolute opposite to each other, instead, they include each other. The basic characteristics of the concept of yin-yang are as follow. Firstly, yin-yang “is always a symbolic approach, which safeguards against human tendency to absolutize reality” and uses “relationality as the basic category of existence” (Lee 1996, 54). This thinking is best described as “both/and” way of thinking (that is, an inclusive way of thinking) rather than the “either/or” exclusive way of thinking, which is the characteristic of Western approach to reality. It looks at the seemingly opposite phenomena and entities as relative to each other, instead of absolutely opposing (54). For example, darkness exists because there is an absence of light. Without the entity “light”, “darkness” cannot be defined. So, they are interdependent and even inclusive of each other. Secondly, this concept is based on the idea that change is the ultimate reality. Yin and yang signify a process of change. Yin and yang constantly interact with each other in this process of change. This thinking is, therefore, “a dynamic and organic worldview” (Lee 1996, 54).]*

### 2.6 The Three Treasures

Religious Taoism accepts the tenets of Philosophical Taoism and has additional tenets that govern their rites and rituals. The Three Treasures are derived from Tao Te Ching and the Five Precepts from the Taoist Canon (*daozang* 道藏) (Taoist Federation Singapore 2019). The Three Treasures (三宝) are basically the three virtues taken from Philosophical Taoism. The Three Treasures are compassion (慈), frugality (俭) and humility (不敢为天下先) (Culham 2014, 34).

### 2.7 The Five Precepts

In Taoism, the Five Precepts (五戒) constitute the basic code of ethics undertaken mainly by lay practitioners. According to the *Zhengtong daozang* (正统道藏), the five basic precepts are (Taoist Federation Singapore 2019):

The first precept: No Killing
The second precept: No Stealing
The third precept: No Sexual Misconduct
The fourth precept: No False Speech
The fifth precept: No Taking of Intoxicants

### 3. Taoist Scriptures of Religious Taoism

Taoism claims thousands of texts as having scriptural value, incorporating them into a corpus, like a treasury of books, called *Daozang* (道藏) (Ching 1993, 111). The most frequently studied Taoist Canon is the *Zhengtong Daozang* (正统道藏), which was completed during the reign of the Ming Dynasty Zhengtong emperor in 1445 (Boltz 2008, 30). The Ming Taoist Canon contains 1500 or so texts. They were written by Taoists from different lineages, and contain a wide mix of things including collections of talismans and incantations, works on divination and tracts of the popular religion (Pas 1998, 323-325). This treasury of Taoist scriptural canon is divided into three major sections or Caverns (三洞) namely, *Dongzhen* (洞真 - Cavern of Perfection), *Dongxuan* (洞玄 - Cavern of Mystery), and *Dongshen* (洞神 - Cavern of Spirit) (Boltz 2008, 33). Most of these works use esoteric, multi-level symbolic language and alchemical terms, and were collected around 400 AD by Taoist priests (道士) in their attempts to bring together all the teachings of Taoism. Many of the works were purportedly revealed by the deities (神) to humans. Four supplements (四辅) were added around 500 AD (Pregadio 2008, 941-942). The origins of The Four Supplements (四辅) are less clear. They could have come from the Taoist masters serving at the imperial court with their talismans and exorcism texts (Ching 1993, 112).

**Table 1. The Three Caverns (三洞)**

First Cavern Tung-chen (洞真)	It has as its core the Shangching (上清) scriptures, and a liturgical poem with names of gods and spirits. This is associated with the Mao-shan (茅山) movement near Nanking.
Second Cavern Tung-hsuan (洞玄)	It has as its core the Ling-pao (灵宝) scriptures, with the inclusion talismans and added texts. It has a strong Buddhist flavour.
Third Cavern Tung-shen (洞神)	It has as its core the San-huang (三皇 Three Sovereigns) scriptures.

Source: Ching 1993, 111.

**Table 2. The Four Supplements (四辅)**

Tai-hsian (太玄)	This is a supplement to the First Cavern. Its central text is Tao Te Ching itself.
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T'ai-p'ing (太平)	This is a supplement to the Second Cavern. Its central text is the Tai-ping Ching (太平经 Classic of the Great Peace).
T'ai-ch'ing (太清)	This is a supplement to the Third Cavern. Its texts deal with alchemy. It has the Sanhuang (三皇 Three Sovereigns) scriptures as its nucleus.
Cheng-yi (正一)	This is a supplement to all three scriptures above. It consists of the canonical texts of the Heavenly Masters sect (师派).

Source: Ching 1993, 112.

### C. CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES

The practices of Taoism focus on self-cultivation. However, as Taoism moves into the lives of the masses and became a religion of the masses, it started to develop into various forms of rites, rituals, and festivals.

#### 1. Self-Cultivation in Taoism

The practice of self-cultivation is not quite uniform in Taoism. It tends to be eclectic. It can take the form of a personal quest for immortality to participation in monastic communities where priests offer healing, exorcism using talisman and charms (Ching 1993, 104-111).

##### 1.1. Quest for Immortality

To the Taoists, eternal life is not spiritual immortality alone. They look forward to "the survival of the whole person" because they do not view the spirit and matter as separate (Ching 1993, 104-105). To attain such immortality (成仙), the Taoists developed a way of self-cultivation, which includes healing, breath circulation, meditative exercises, eating elixir and sexual hygiene (105). However, such teachings are usually passed down in secret from teachers to disciples. Thus, such practices are not practiced by all Taoists (106-107).

##### 1.2. Taoist Monasticism

The two sects of Taoist Monasticism that still survive until today are the Perfect Truth (全真) (Quanzhen) sect and Heavenly Master (天师)(Tien-Shih), also called Zhengyi (正一) sect. The practices of the Perfect Truth Sect are close to that of Buddhism Monasticism. They have monasteries of celibate priests "who are required to practise frequent fasts, abstain from alcohol, and pursue the techniques of alchemy and meditations" (Ching 1993, 112). The Heavenly Master sect keeps "a married and often hereditary priesthood and few food taboos" (113). The sect concentrates more on the use of healing, exorcism, the use of talisman and charms (113). In Singapore, there is the San Qing Gong (三清宫), a renowned Taoist temple located in the Eastern part of Singapore (SanQingGong 2013). It houses the Taoist Federation Singapore, the Taoist Federation Youth Group, Taoist College of Singapore. Its objective is the promotion of Taoism in Singapore. The adherents come from both the Quanzhen and Zhengyi sects (Taoist Federation Singapore 2019).

#### 2. Rites and Rituals of Taoism

The rites and rituals of Taoism are diverse and varied. They may also vary from one country to another. This is especially so when the practices adapt to the local patron deities. Listed below are some of the common rites and rituals.

##### 2.1 Worship of Deities

*Shen* (神), deity refers to beings and sages. They must have divine powers, mastered the art of self-cultivation, accumulated great merits, or have realised the truth of life and death (Taoist Federation Singapore 2019). Taoists believe that these deities will answer their prayers and shower blessings on them (Taoist Federation Singapore 2019). Basically, there are three tiers of deities.

**Table 3. Three Tiers of Deities**

Tier 1	The highest tier comprises the San Qing (三清) or the Three Pure Ones (三清道祖). They are Yu Qing (玉清 Jade Pure), Shang Qing (上清 Upper Pure) and Tai Qing (太清 Great Pure)
Tier 2	The second tier consist of the Three Pure Ones are the four holy emperors (四御) among whom Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝) comes first, Emperor of the North Pole (北极大帝), Emperor of the Supreme Heaven (天皇大帝), Emperor of the Earth (后土皇) is a female deity who presides over child-bearing matters.
Tier 3	This tier consists of other deities who take charge of different daily matters. There are the God of Wind, God of Rain, God of Fire, God of Town, and God of Earth. There is also the so-called San Guan (三管). They are the official of Heaven who blesses people, the official of Earth who gives absolution, and the official of Water who wards off disasters.

Source: Tan 2018, 33; Taoist Federation Singapore 2019.

These Taoist deities have different qualities and attributes, and various ceremonies were conducted based on circumstances to appeal to them. Among these deities are the eight immortals (八仙) and Tien-Shih (天师) (Morgan 2001, 241-242). The more popular deities that are often found in most Chinese households are Tiangong (天公) (Jade Emperor of Heaven), Tudishen (土地神) (Earth God) and Zaojun (灶君) (Kitchen God) (Tan 2018, 32-33).

## 2.2 Burning of Incense and Sacred Writing

Burning of incense, together with sacrificial offering of food, is a common Taoist practice (Taoist Federation Singapore 2019). The incense acts as a means of communication between the Taoists and the deities. Through this means, the wishes and blessings are sent to the heavenly deities and the spirits in the netherworld. Sometimes, sacred writing, such as talismans or paper bearing prayers of the worshippers, giving their names and their intention, are also burnt. Incense can be offered every day, but some people have nether the time nor the opportunity to do so, hence the tradition of offering incense every 15 days or so (on the 1st and 15th day) is passed on (Taoist Federation Singapore 2019).

## 2.3 Exorcism, Healing Rituals and Other Shamanistic Practices

Exorcism and healing rituals are often performed by priests who are licensed to do so. These priests are usually authorised by the Heavenly Master, who is the head of the sect (Ching 1993, 115). During the rituals, they usually wear elaborate and even outlandish costumes and make use of incense, music and other devices and equipment (Morgan 2001, 252). Their main purpose during these rituals is to struggle for victory over evil spirits which cause sickness in the devotees. Some of these priests are also shamans or spirit-mediums “who assist the faithful with their counsels and fortune-telling, explain the influence of the stars and assist communication with the spirits of the beloved dead” (Ching 1993, 116).

## 2.4 Funeral Rites

The term *gongde* (功德) refers to the accumulation of merit through doing good or following the Tao (Haruji 2008, 449). The merit is derived from the Taoist priest's reading of the scriptures directed at the deceased to bring about their salvation. *Gongde* can be performed for half a day or a full day, and those performed on a grand scale can last longer. The ritual consists of four main parts: (i) Introit, (ii) Rite of Merit, (iii) Rite of Salvation, and (iv) Closing ceremony (449-451). First, in the Introit section the salvation of the deceased is requested through the recitation of scriptures, repentance, and special rites (449). Second, the Merit section of the ritual is performed in the day, while the Writ of Pardon is performed in the night (450). Third, in the Rite of Salvation the deceased is symbolically led from the underworld to heaven through a dramatic enactment (450-451). Fourth, this is the Closing ceremony.

This is often followed by the Taoist tradition of burning paper offerings. Paper offerings are burnt to ashes and dispatched to the gods, the ghosts, and the ancestors (Scott 2007, 20).

### 3. Taoist Festival: The Hungry Ghost Festival

The Hungry Ghost Festival is one of the most important festivals for the Taoists. It is celebrated throughout the seventh month of the lunar calendar (especially on the fifteenth day of the month). The Taoists believe that, during this period, the hungry souls of the dead will appear and roam in the world of the living. The Taoist priests are usually engaged to free these hungry ghosts from their suffering (Water 2002, 151).

### 4. Fengshui

The Taoist's concept of *Yin-Yang* theory is based on the philosophical principle of two energies as *Qi* and the Five Elements Theory (Tong 2006, 13). This is the idea that everything in the whole world comes from the five basic elements of Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water. The Five Elements Theory also asserts *qi* resides in all created things. *Feng Shui* (风水) literally means the art of "wind and water" is used to describe the flow of this *qi* (3). *Feng Shui* is a belief that every item in life holds an energy, known as *qi* (6). The idea is to balance the items (five elements) that exude these *qi*-energies to attain a positive relationship with the environment. Human being is a microcosm that embodies this *qi*, and so should seek to balance the *qi* in oneself with the energies in the environment to assure good health and good fortune.

### 5. Qi Gong

*Qi Gong* is practised as a healing exercise to balance the *qi* in the human body. *Qi Gong* employs coordinated breathing, movement, and awareness to cultivate mental focus and bring about healing (Despeux 2008, 796). The aim is to open the body's inner channels and provide a free flow of energy *qi*. This is supposed to bring healing and well-being.

## D. CHRISTIANITY'S ENCOUNTERS WITH TAOISM

Taoism, together with Confucianism, are classified as the indigenous religions of China. While Buddhism is not considered an indigenous religion, it has significant influence in China because it was well received by the imperial courts and the people beginning from the Tang dynasty. The discussion below focuses on the interaction between Christianity and Taoism in China.

### 1. The Jesus Sutras of the Nestorians

During the Tang dynasty, the Nestorians led by Alopen arrived in Changan around 635 AD (Irvin and Sunquist 2001, 316). During this period, Tang dynasty had an open approach to all other religions and there were active inter-religious dialogues (321). The Nestorians even borrowed from Buddhist and Taoist ideas to articulate their faith (321). In fact, this led to the mixing of religious ideas which caused Christianity to lose its uniqueness and hence weakened the Christian faith. The Nestorian Documents or the Jesus Sutras are a set Chinese scrolls from the seventh and eighth centuries that combined the teachings of Jesus with Eastern thoughts (Burns and Ruggles 2005, 58). It is believed that these are based on the second-century Syriac text (from the Teachings of the Apostles) brought by Persian missionaries to China around 635 AD (58). The missionaries probably incorporated elements of Taoist and Buddhist spirituality from the people they met along the Silk Road. Their intention was to share Jesus in a context that the Chinese could understand and appreciate. These documents reflect the attempt of the Nestorians to make the Christian faith relevant in a Taoist and Buddhist environment. As Cashin puts it, the Nestorians tried to contextualise the gospel using Taoist and Buddhist concepts, and at times using Taoist terminology to illustrate the Christian concept and distancing itself from the viewpoints of Buddhism (2016, 181). The text interprets Jesus as the Tao and reinterprets the salvation of Christ as the product of karma of the previous lives (181). The result is a faith that sounds more like a Taoist sect with Buddhist elements, and it has completely lost its distinct gospel message of the historical Jesus and His teachings. It was little wonder that this Nestorian form of Taoist Christianity did not really impress the Chinese during the Tang dynasty era.



**[Teacher's Notes:****Classical Taoism**

Taoism as a religion underwent two critical periods of development, first during the Six dynasties 六朝 (222-589 AD) and second during the Jin 金 (1115-1234 AD) and Yuan 元 (1217-1368 AD) dynasties (Kirkland 2002, 181-182, 187; Fung 1948, 215-216). During these two periods, Taoism as a religion experienced a development of its religious thought and sects. While the Taoist sects inherited the teaching from Daojia 道家, these sects developed their own religious thought. This development caused the sects to deviate from each other, leading to the development of different religious scriptures. This diversity also gives rise to difficulties in conducting meaningful Christian-Taoist dialogues. At the court or literati level, Taoism did not really have any official recognition or appeal. Taoism was seen to be unable to assert any political influence as it was seen to be philosophical, escapist, and impractical (Fung 1948, 214). Confucianism was preferred by the establishment and thus took centre-stage. As such, the Christian missionaries who came later during the Tang, Yuan and Ming dynasties did not engage with Taoism. At the level of the populace, religious Taoism was far too eclectic for a systematic or meaningful Christian-Taoist dialogue to take place.]

**Christianity and Taoism in the Sung Dynasty**

During the Northern Sung Dynasty, Taoism continued to enjoy imperial support, just like the Tang dynasty (Kirkland 2002, 187). After the fall of the Northern Sung, Taoism had to survive in a politically unstable environment (187). Eventually, the weak Southern Sung dynasty was replaced by the Mongolians. The second wave of missionary were the Franciscan friars sent by Pope Innocent IV to Mongol China during the Yuan dynasty. The Franciscan missionaries proved to be less impactful than the Nestorian, they paid little attention to Chinese religions (Ching 1993, 190). Instead, there was tussle between the Nestorian Christians and the arrival of the Roman Catholic missionaries (Moffett 1992, 457). The Franciscans forsook the Chinese liturgy used by the Nestorians and replaced it with Latin ones from Rome (Covell 1986, 38). There was no real interaction between Christianity and Taoism.

**Christianity and Taoism in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties**

After the Yuan dynasty came the Ming dynasty. The Ming emperors established a curriculum for national education based on the Confucian teachings of Chu Hsi (1130-1200), Chu Hsi's teaching was narrow and intolerant of other perspectives and challenged the Buddhist and Taoist traditions (Kirkland 2002, 191). The third wave of missionaries were the Jesuits who came to China during the Ming dynasty which was also the time of the high Renaissance in Europe. Matteo Ricci, the best-known China missionary. The Jesuits regarded Taoism to be an idolatrous superstition. They saw it as a "religion of the common people, which practiced repulsive rituals associated with exorcism, geomancy and longevity" (Clarke 2000, 39). The Jesuits had a higher regard for Confucian culture. As such, they were largely engaging Confucianism and they won some converts from the Confucian elite (191). The Jesuit's success continued into the Manchu Ch'ing period (1644-1912). This will be discussed in greater detail in our lesson on Confucianism.

**Christianity and Taoism in the Qing Dynasty**

The Manchurian emperors K'ang-hsi (r.1662-1722) and Yung-cheng (r.1723-1736) continued to recognize Taoism, but Ch'ien-lung (r.1736-1796) effectively banished all Taoists from the political arena (Kirkland 2002, 191-192). The Manchus marginalized Taoism and saw it as peasant superstition. The Qing emperors continued to receive the missionaries, and not just the Jesuits but also the Dominicans who came in later (Moffett 2005, 119-120). The Qing emperors favoured Confucianism rather than the Taoism as the foundation for their empire, so the engagement was largely between Christianity and Confucianism. The greatest debate was termed the Rites Controversy which dealt with how much Christianity can adapt or accept Chinese traditions and culture. This will be discussed later under Confucianism.]

**2. Christianity and Taoism in the Modern Era**

The first thing the Protestant missionaries discovered was that the Catholic missions that have been around for centuries in China was largely engaging the imperial courts and the literati. The Protestant missionaries started by engaging the Chinese common folks. The first Protestant missionary Robert

Morrison started by translating the Bible into the Chinese language (Moffett 2005, 288). He was aided by a local Chinese by the name of Liang Fa who was also well-versed in Confucian classics. Liang Fa also became the first Chinese Protestant evangelist (291). Taoism was clearly declining in its influence at the imperial courts during the Ming and Qing periods. However, it has significant impact on the populace because of its integration with popular culture and folk customs.

Taoism was prevalent in the lower classes of society. It was integrating into folk customs and popular conventions. At this popular level, Taoism was tied to ordinary people's daily life. This is especially so in the rural areas. Protestant Christian missionaries and evangelists like Morrison had to work with the tension that converts to Christianity were required to leave their religious practices, particularly the veneration of ancestors, worship of gods and the practice of divination (Overmyer 2009, 46). The first Chinese sect that adopted Christian ideas was the Taiping (太平) Heavenly Kingdom of 1850-1864. Its founder, Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全), who was influenced by one of Liang Fa's tracts and Chinese translations of the Bible, believed that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ, and proclaimed that he had received direct revelations from *Shangdi* (上帝). This sect practised adult baptism, and also taught repentance and obedience as the way to heaven, and set aside the seventh day of the week as a day of worship (47).

They forbade ancestral worship and divination, and destroyed images of Chinese deities (47). But this sect and its followers disappeared when the rebellion was crushed by the Qing army. In the era of the Republic, there were strong negative sentiments against the foreigners, and hence the missionaries, who were exerting political and military pressure on China during this period. There were suggestions that it was the indigenous Chinese Christian communities that were holding the new believers by providing them with an alternative community (48). In 1906 Yu Guozhen (俞国楨), a Presbyterian pastor established the Chinese Christian Union (基督教会) in Shanghai (48). Between 1917 and 1919, there was the True Jesus Church, which was an indigenous Pentecostal movement proclaiming the imminent return of Christ, the power of healing, and speaking in unknown tongues (48). In the 1920s, there was the Assembly Hall, or the "Little Flock" led by the evangelist Ni Tuosheng (倪柝声) which stressed personal holiness (48). All these were attempts by the local Chinese Christian leaders to create an alternative spiritual practice and community for the believers who came from a Taoist and folk religions background. They probably formed the roots of the indigenous Chinese churches that flourished despite the persecution in the period of the Communist rule in China.

## E. BUILDING BRIDGES FOR THE GOSPEL

This section will take a comparative look at Taoism and Christianity. The discussion will look at what elements in Taoism are to be deleted, revised, or affirmed in Christianity. This will allow the Christians to see the opportunities for interreligious dialogues and for the preaching of the gospel to Taoists.

### 1. Delete Practice of Polytheism

The religious Taoists revere humans whom they think have attained immortality and worship them. They will also make idols of these "immortals" and conduct rituals and ceremonies to worship them. Such practices contradict God's commandments and cannot be accepted. God's commandment is that there is no other god before Him (Exodus 20:3). Christians need to help the Taoist understand that there is no other god except YHWH. God forbids man to make any idol "in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" and man shall not worship them (Exodus 20:4-5). Therefore, the polytheistic practices in Taoism must be deleted. Christians need to help Taoists understand that these idols are merely lifeless, man-made objects, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell (Deuteronomy 4:28; Leviticus 36:30). Humans also cannot claim to have attained immortality and can never become gods. Salvation is in Christ only (Ephesians 2:8-9).

### 2. Revise Seeking divine Counsel and Protection

The Taoist believe in various types of *shen* (神), deity. There are the spirit beings of heaven like Tien Gong (天公), spirit beings of earth like Tu Di Gong (土地公), household deities like kitchen god, temple deities like nine-emperor god (九皇大帝), and good and evil spirits. Taoists often seek advice from

deities (问神) concerning issues in everyday life. In this aspect, Taoism is a very practical and pragmatic religion as it engages the deities in all the daily affairs of the devotees. For better or for worse, the Taoists have a certain reverence towards these deities. Devotees will cast lots to seek advice from the gods. This process would require the worshippers to shake a container filled with lots until one of falls out. They will then seek advice of the temple clerk to interpret the lot with respect to their specific query (Tan 2018, 50). They may also cast a pair of moon shaped blocks which is also known as *jiaobei* (筊杯) to seek approval from the deity. The tossing of the *jiaobei* is also known as *wenbei* (问杯) and the answers are believed to be produced by the pattern of the *jiaobei* landing. This practice of seeking advice can be revised. Taoist who are converted to Christianity must be taught to seek the counsel of God, the Holy Spirit, and the church leadership in the affairs of their everyday life (Proverbs 1:7; 12:15; John 16:12-15). This will continue to preserve the sense of reverence they have for God in their daily lives (Proverbs 3:5-8).

### 3. Affirm: Judgment after Death

Taoists believe that the deceased will have to face judgement in hell after they die. Taoists have the concept of the ten halls of judgement and the eighteen levels of hell (Tong 2003, 69). There is a book of death and life which records the deeds of the deceased. Depending on the merit gained, the deceased will be sent to the different courts of judgement. The Taoists have an elaborate ritual to assist the deceased to escape from hell, and either get reincarnated or enter the Western Paradise (Tong 2003, 82). The family of the deceased must participate in a ritual where they walk around the coffin to help the deceased move up from the levels of hell. This process will go on until the deceased comes to the bridge between the netherworld and the Western Paradise. From the biblical perspective, Christians can affirm the fact that after death comes judgement (Hebrews 9:27). However, no one can perform any rite or ritual to save the deceased (Luke 16:19-31). Only Jesus can save man from death and the consequence of sins (1 Corinthians 15:55-58)

### F. CONCLUSION

This lesson has provided a better understanding of the characteristics and practices of Taoism. Taoism has its influence in the daily lives of its adherents in *fengshui*, *qi gong* and traditional Chinese medicine, and in the popular folk religions of the Chinese communities. Some of these practices and beliefs are so ingrained in the adherents that an in-depth understanding of Taoism is necessary for the Christians to find inroads to preach the gospel. Only then can Christians find ways to build bridges to these adherents and help them come to faith in Christ.

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