

Daoism

Daoism is one of China's three ancient streams of thought (alongside Confucianism and Buddhism). It acts as a kind of counterpart/complement to Confucianism as the two paths are quite different. Moreover, Daoism permeates Chinese culture affecting aesthetics, medicine, martial arts, and much more.

Note on Language

There is no natural way to write Chinese languages in a Roman alphabet. Two systems developed over time. Terms below on the left mean the same as those on the right.

Wade-Giles (Older practice)	Hanyu Pinyin (Newer practice)
Tao	**Dao**
Taoism	Daoism
Tao Te Ching	Daode Jing
I Ching	Yi Jing
Lao Tzu	Laozi
Chuang Tzu	Zhuangzi



Ancestor worship is ancient in China and other neighbouring socieities.

Roots

Daoism emerges during the **Warring States period** when chaos breeds a search for answers. Daoism's roots drew on Chinese folk religion which emphasized:

- **Numerous** spirits and **deities**
- **Ancestor veneration**
- A **cosmic Order** (Tian translated as "heaven")
- Physical and spiritual planes are meshed
    - Employed **divination**, often using the text called the **I Ching**
- Complimentary Dualism (**opposites exist in balance**)
- Observing **nature's patterns** (seasons, astrology, phases of the moon)



The I Ching, a divination text, is one of China's oldest books.

Counter Confucious



Confucius' teachings emphasized:

- Education, diligence, and **effort**. Order is hard. **Proper conduct is hard**.
- Relying on **past sages and tradition**.
- **Propriety**! One must follow appropriate rules and use rituals to structure social life appropriately.
- Focusing on **human life** (politics and social life). Does not examine metaphysics or nature.
- Daoism will largely challenge these key views of Confucianism.

Lao Tzu **(c. 500 BCE)**

- Whether myth or man, Lao-Tzu is named as **Daoism's founder.**
- Tradition says this archivist, who studied Chinese learning, retires and, in response to a border guard's request to write what he has learned, he **pens the Daode Jing in one night**.
- Tradition records **miracles around his conception and birth**.



Lao Tzu



Ancient Chinese used turtle shells and animal shoulder bones for divination.

Daoism: One or Three?

There is no word for “Daoism” in Mandarin. Instead, there are three words, **Daojia**, **Daojiao**, and **Daoshu**.

Daojia **(“School of the Way”) Philosophical Daoism**

Follows the Dao or "Way":

- The way of nature, of the cosmos, and of **life if lived ideally**
- An **impersonal force**, akin to the “force” in Star Wars
- Has **similarities and key differences** with the **Abrahamic god**



Abrahamic God	**Dao**
<-- Enduring; Ineffable; Source of all -->	
Planner	Spontaneous
Maker	Creates by not-making (grows?)
Lord	Low position emphasized (like water)
Personal	Impersonal

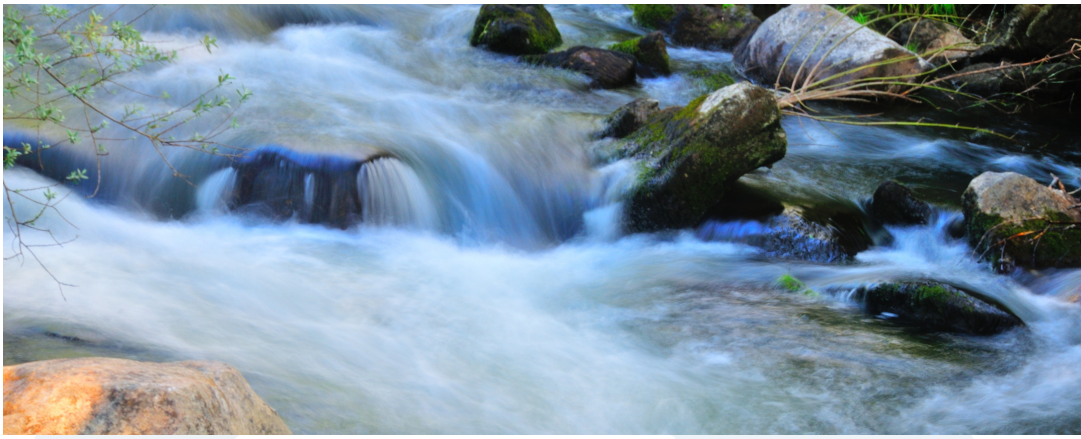




De

- Translates as something like **power**, virtue or the inner quality **of an act or person**

- It is the Dao at work



Wu Wei

- The action of non-action

- Not nothing; rather more like **nothing wasted.**
  - The right act at the right moment.
  - Frictionless. **Does not force or push**. Acts efficiently.
  - The person is **part conduit**, much like a musician or an artist might feel they are channeling something bigger than themselves.

- Most frequent analogy in the Daode Jing is **water** which is **soft and yielding**, **yet** erodes rocks and **carves canyons**.



Yin Yang (Taijitu)



- Means **shadow side/sunny side** of a mountain.
  - Indicates not just **polarity** but **change** since shadows move.

- **Complementary dualism.** One side does not win or conquer the other; the two must exist in balance..

Chaio

- **Relativity** – what is good or bad, judged right or wrong, depends on circumstances.

Philosophical Daoism is taught in a student/teacher model and also incorporated into Chinese culture.



"Sai Weng lost his horse" is a common Chinese saying, meaning that something apparently good can turn out to be bad, and vice versa. All is relative.

Daojiao ("Traditions of the Way") – Religious Daoism

- In 142, **Zhang Daoling** has a vision of a **deified Laozi** who **tells him to go preach and convert**
  - Buddhism is expanding rapidly in China at the time

- Various sects appear that may incorporate:
  - **Theocracies**;
  - **Apocalyptic sects** with miraculous healings and messianic figures;
  - **Talismans**;
  - Hereditary priesthoods, mediums, fortune tellers (**practicing divination and astrology**);
  - Chanting and **purification rites**;
  - **Many deities** (astral deities, deities of organs);
  - **Seasonal festivals**;
  - **Monastic orders** (which may reject much of the above).



Daoism shifts from a philosophical school to a more religious path with the visions of Zhang Daoling.



Daoshu

(“Arts of the Way”) – Energy Practices



- Based on **biospirituality** – meaning it blends health/morals/nature, connecting body, spirit and the natural world.
  - **Goal is to maximize qi.**
- The **5 Phases** connect the cosmos with bodily health.
  - **Links elements with organs, planets, colours, seasons, emotions, flavours**, etc.
- Uses **yin/yang principles** (polarity, fluidity and transformation).
- **Emphasizes process and relatedness**. Problems come from changes that have or have not happened. One aspect’s relation to another can provide medicines and solutions. **Basis for Chinese medicine and healing arts** (alchemy, herbs, acupuncture, feng shui, tai chi).







The need to orient buildings to cardinal directions helped spur the invention of the compass.

The five phases signify change and relatedness as each phase leads to the next.





Cultural Impact

- Daoism has embedded values of **simplicity, brevity, spontaneity, naturalness** and **yin-yang ideas** (polarity and change) into many elements of Chinese and East Asian culture.
    - **Artistic influences** (visual art with negative space; haiku poetry; natural gardens).
    - **Sun Tzu's Art of War**.
    - Daoism's encounter with Buddhism fosters **Zen Buddhism.**



- **Daoism** can be seen as **either a rival or a complement to Confucianism.**
    - Where Confucianism values order, hierarchy, and tradition, Daoism values **naturalness, equality,** and **spontaneity**.
    - One might see these two indigenous schools of thought as a kind of **yin (Daoism)** and **yang (Confucianism)**.





- The **Communist Revolution decimated Daoist institutions** (temples, priests, etc.). There is a minor revival today and the tradition continues to be reflected in deep cultural norms.

Mao's revolution defrocked or killed perhaps 99% of the Daoist priests and many temples.





Ma Yuan or "one corner Ma" made very Daoist art using lots of empty space, simple designs and usually just two colours, black and white.





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Quote & Poem

"Nothing in the world
is as soft and yielding as water.
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,
nothing can surpass it.
The soft overcomes the hard;
the gentle overcomes the rigid.
Everyone knows this is true,
but few can put it into practice."

Dao De Jing, Verse 78

Prince Wen Hui's Cook

(Part 1)

"Prince Wen Hui's cook
Was cutting up an ox.
Out went a hand,
Down went a shoulder,
He planted a foot,
He pressed with a knee,
The ox fell apart
With a whisper,
The bright cleaver murmured
Like a gentle wind.
Rhythm! Timing!
Like a sacred dance,
Like "The Mulberry Grove,"
Like ancient harmonies!
"Good work!" the Prince exclaimed,
"Your method is faultless!"
"Method?" said the cook
Laying aside his cleaver,
"What I follow is Tao
Beyond all methods!"

(Part 2)

"When I first began
To cut up an oxen
I would see before me
The whole ox
All in one mass.
"After three years
I no longer saw this mass.
I saw the distinctions.
"But now, I see nothing
With the eye. My whole being
Apprehends.
My senses are idle. The spirit
Free to work without plan
Follows its own instinct
Guided by natural line,
By the secret opening, the hidden space,
My cleaver finds its own way.
I cut through no joint, chop no bone.
A good cook needs a new chopper

Story Cont'd

(Part 3)

Once a year–he cuts.
A poor cook needs a new one
Every month–he hacks!
“I have used this same cleaver
Nineteen years.
It has cut up
A thousand oxen.
Its edge is as keen
As if newly sharpened.
“There are spaces in the joints;
The blade is thin and keen:
When this thinness
Finds that space
There is all the room you need!
It goes like a breeze!
Hence I have this cleaver nineteen years
As if newly sharpened!
“True, there are sometimes
Tough joints. I feel them coming,
I slow down, I watch closely,
Hold back, barely move the blade,
And whump! the part falls away
Landing like a clod of earth.
“Then I withdraw the blade,
I stand still

(Part 4)

And let the joy of the work
Sink in.
I clean the blade
And put it away.”
Prince Wan Hui said,
“This is it! My cook has shown me
How I ought to live
My own life!”

Chuang Tzu, The Way of Chuang Tzu,

translated by Thomas Merton
https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8291003-prince-wen-hui-s-cook-was-cutting-up-an-ox-out

notes

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