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*Associate Professor of Religious Studies,  
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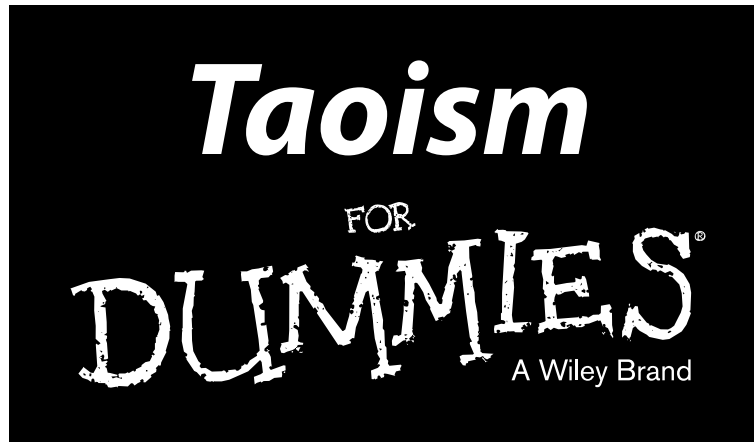
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**by Jonathan R. Herman, PhD**



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## Dedication

To my mother, Mae, who loved to teach and who continues to teach me how to teach out of love.

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# Introduction

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**T**aoism is one of China's "Three Teachings," a religious tradition that traces back to a mythic sage named Lao Tzu and flourishes today in modern China, as well as other parts of East Asia. In recent years, it has even begun to make some headway into Western Europe and North America. Almost every basic world religions textbook has a chapter on it, and many bookstores carry a smattering of Taoist texts or books about some aspect of Taoism.

But if you want to start learning something about Taoism, how do you know where to begin? Some books barely whet your appetite with a brief historical summary and provocative quotations from a handful of classical texts, while others overwhelm you with technical language and microscopic analysis. Some encourage you to adopt Taoist philosophy in your own life, or package Taoism as the latest in "self-help" — but you never really know whether they're just making it all up!

Fortunately, your troubles are over.

## About This Book

This book introduces Taoism in a way that makes it easy to grasp, while at the same time giving you a clear sense of parts of the tradition that can get a little complicated. You can follow the development of Taoism from its origins in ancient China, through the specific sects that have survived in a rapidly changing contemporary Chinese society, all the way to organizations that have popped up in New York, San Francisco, and other North American cities. And you can find out about Taoist ideas, texts, and practices — everything from "non-doing" and *yin-yang* philosophy to *ch'i-kung* and rituals of cosmic renewal.

We're talking here about a religious tradition that has undergone more than two millennia of history, transformed over time, given rise to multiple sects and lineages, and played a role in the lives of literally *billions* of people, so it would be pretty hard to dig into every single detail with the depth that each one deserves. But that doesn't mean that a book like this can't touch as many bases as possible and have some fun while doing so. You can count on this book being broad (it covers a wide spectrum of Taoist information), accurate (it doesn't tell you anything that isn't true), and understandable (it never tries to dazzle you with fancy language or dense philosophical banter). And mostly, you can count on it being an enjoyable and entertaining read.

## Conventions Used in This Book

Because this book presents its subjects in a straightforward, easy-to-digest style, you don't have to memorize a bunch of specialized conventions before you even get started, but I do want to let you know about a few standard practices that this book follows:

- ✓ The book assigns dates using B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era) instead of B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (*Anno Domini*, or "In the Year of the Lord"), because the newer designations are more religiously neutral. But this isn't a big deal, because they're referring to the same calendar.
- ✓ I don't talk about Taoism as a "religion" as much as a "religious tradition" or simply a "tradition." This helps break the habit of thinking of Taoism (or any *-ism*, for that matter) as one fixed, unchanging entity that exists apart from the way human beings construct it, employ it, and transform it. Somehow, a "tradition" gives the impression of being more fluid and internally diverse than a "religion."
- ✓ Finally, and this is the big one, although I don't want to overwhelm you with long lists of hard-to-pronounce Chinese words, there are enough important people in Taoist history that you really need to pick up some rudimentary ground rules for how to read *Romanized* (that is, English-language versions of) Chinese words and names. And this will probably come in handy well beyond *Taoism For Dummies*. The system of Romanization this book uses is the Wade-Giles system, which is covered in Appendix C.

When you read Chinese words and names, try saying them out loud (using the pronunciation guide in Appendix C). People learn words and names better when they actually hear them, instead of just reading the letters on the printed page, and I promise you it'll be a whole lot easier to keep track of them when you try it this way.

These are the biggest conventions to keep in mind. But in addition to these, my editor wanted me to let you know that I *italicize* new terms when they're first used (and define them shortly thereafter, often in parentheses), and I use `monofont` for web addresses.

**Note:** When this book was printed, some web addresses may have needed to break across two lines of text. If that happened, rest assured that we haven't put in any extra characters (such as hyphens) to indicate the break. So, when using one of these web addresses, just type in exactly what you see in this book, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist.

## *Foolish Assumptions*

No, I'm not going to knock whatever assumptions you may have about Taoism — that wouldn't be fair. But I am going to come clean about some of the assumptions that I have about *you*:

- ✓ You're probably not a Taoist, but you have some interest in this particular tradition, in China more generally, or in any religious tradition that's not your own.
- ✓ You take seriously the religious beliefs and practices of other people, and you want to become familiar with Taoism as one way to understand your friends, neighbors, or colleagues a little better.
- ✓ You don't necessarily know a lot about Taoism, and you probably don't know all the technical vocabulary when it comes to religion, but you're interested in the subject and a quick-enough study that you'll pick up a lot, as long as I don't talk down to you and just explain things in a straightforward way.

## *How This Book Is Organized*

Regardless of websites that tell you Taoism is nothing more than adopting a philosophy of simplicity and “going with the flow,” the historical Taoist religious tradition is actually tremendously complex, with distinct lineages and sects, an extensive pantheon of deities, a hierarchical priesthood, and texts that are intelligible only to those who've been initiated into certain teachings.

To make your journey into Taoism a little less intimidating, this book is organized into distinct parts, each of which is built around a broad theme. These parts don't follow any standard formula, or correspond to any official Taoist “orthodoxy” — they're just presented in a way that makes the subject more approachable and lets you look into the areas you find most interesting.

### *Part 1: Navigating the World of Taoism*

This part lets you tiptoe into the world of Taoism by introducing you to its Chinese religious background and presenting an overview of the tradition. It straightens out some common misconceptions, points out the ambiguity of the word *Taoism*, and gives you some important distinctions to help you navigate the rest of the book.

## ***Part II: Looking At the Development of Taoism***

Every story starts at the beginning, and the story of Taoism is no exception. But this story doesn't just give you a dry "names and dates" version of history; instead, it takes you through a remarkable journey of narrative twists and turns. You see how the tradition begins with a handful of classical texts, produces communitarian organizations and self-cultivation groups, evolves into the liturgical and monastic sects you can find in China today, and is developing a Western identity as we speak.

## ***Part III: Examining Important Taoist Concepts***

Here's a chance to take a look at some enduring Taoist ideas and themes, including the concepts of *Tao*, "non-doing," and *yin* and *yang*. It's also a chance to discover some important aspects of Taoism that don't always make it into the world religion textbooks, like the belief in a "new age" or the scriptural canon that includes well over a thousand texts.

## ***Part IV: Exploring Taoist Practices***

Religion is more than a collection of beliefs, doctrines, or texts; it involves how people *live* and what traditions they practice. This section takes a look at some important aspects of Taoist practice, including meditation, alchemy, self-cultivation, martial arts, and ritual.

## ***Part V: The Part of Tens***

In a hurry? Just want some quick bedside reading? Or maybe you like your Taoism straight, with no chaser? Here's Taoism condensed into bite-size portions, a trio of top-ten lists that give you a *very* brief summary of basic entry points into Taoism. Here, you can redress the most common misconceptions, get a road map for seeing some Taoism in action, and even pick up pointers for acquiring Taoist wisdom and applying it to your life.

## Part VI: Appendixes

Doctors say that the human appendix is useless, something that may have once served a purpose but is now just taking up space. But the appendixes in this book actually contain some pretty useful information, and you may want to turn to them from time to time as you read the book.

Appendix A contains a glossary of important Taoist figures, key Taoist terminology, and other technical terms. These can jog your memory if you read the chapters out of sequence, pick up the book only once in a while, or just want a quick way to review a critical mass of material. Appendix B contains some recommendations for other resources you can consult if you'd like to delve deeper into any of the subjects discussed here. And Appendix C is a pronunciation guide, giving you pointers on how to pronounce all the difficult Chinese names and terms you encounter throughout this book. It also includes a chart that compares the Wade–Giles system used in this book with the *pinyin* system that many other sources use.

## Icons Used in This Book

A handful of cute icons show up periodically throughout this book, in part to give you a “goose” to break up the “duck-duck-duck” rhythm of each chapter, but mainly to draw your attention to points that are especially important, interesting, or just worth repeating. Here are the icons you'll find:



The Remember icon points out things to keep in mind as you read a particular chapter or move on to the next one. Often, this contains a surprising bit of information or corrects common misconceptions about Taoism, China, or both.



The Tip icon alerts you to strategies for sorting things out, or for making sense of things that could seem confusing. It may suggest to you *how* you can read or think about a particular section.



The Warning icon gives you a heads-up about places where the subject could start to get more complicated, or topics that not all Taoists agree on or do the same way.



The Technical Stuff icon points out information — background history, complex explanations, problems in interpretation — that is certainly important, but that may be harder to keep track of on your first reading. Feel free either to skim these tidbits or read them extra-carefully, whichever suits you better.

## *Where to Go from Here*

Think of this book as an educational buffet on Taoism, a smorgasbord of resources that are here for only one purpose: to help you understand Taoism better. Depending on which plate you pick up, or where you dip your ladle, you can engage the classical philosophers, meet the medieval alchemists, locate Taoist practice groups in America, hit your head against the counterintuitive idea of “actionless action,” explore the Taoist practice of “sitting and forgetting,” get a look at cults of immortality, and find out how Taoist priests perform rituals from time to time that serve to renew the entire cosmos.

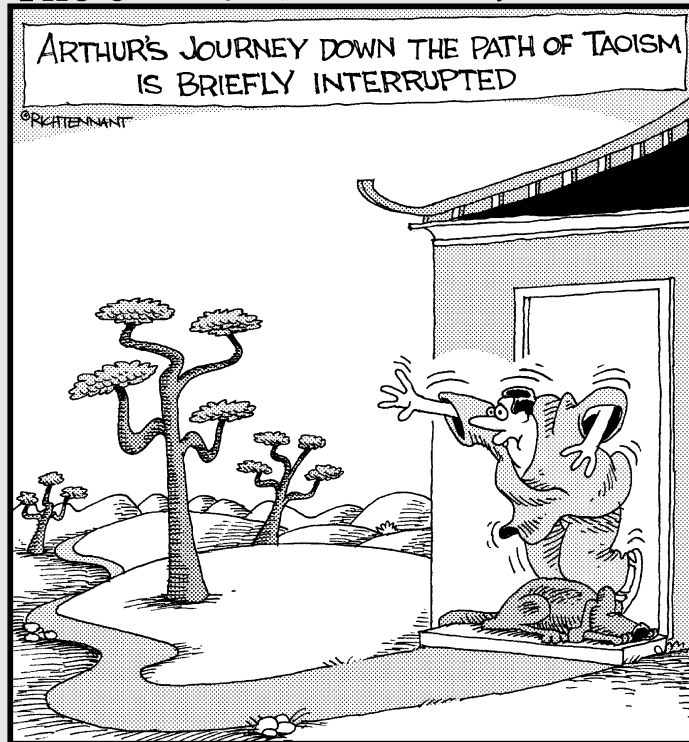
Read this book the way that works best for you. Feel free to read it in order from beginning to end, poke through the Table of Contents to find the themes that most attract you, or just use the Index to chase down a particular text or historical period you’d most like to explore in more detail. Whichever you choose, make sure you have some fun, because Taoism promises you an exciting world of learning. Or to give just a sniff of the Taoist cork, perhaps I should say that Taoism promises you the even more exciting world of *unlearning* — and what could be more fun than that?

# Part I

# Navigating the World of Taoism

The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave

By Rich Tennant



## *In this part . . .*

**W**hen you take your first steps into the world of Taoism, be prepared for some basic questions to come fast and furious. Is Taoism a philosophy or a religion? What's the relationship between Taoism and other Chinese traditions, like Confucianism, Buddhism, or folk religion? What are the different types of Taoism? What are the most common misconceptions about Taoism? How is Taoism different from Western traditions?

Sit back, and get ready to participate in a great adventure. Or better yet, lean forward and prepare to devour every word, because Taoism can be fascinating, sophisticated, and inspiring, and it can also surprise you at every turn.



# Chapter 1

## An Introduction to Taoism

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Getting oriented to Taoism
  - ▶ Tracing Taoist history
  - ▶ Considering Taoist ideas
  - ▶ Examining Taoist practice
- 

Not much more than a half-century ago, many Americans had their main exposure to Chinese people and things Chinese from an exotic meal at the local Chinese restaurant, a touristy adventure in a big-city Chinatown, or even a Charlie Chan movie. Today, things have certainly changed, and the Chinese presence in America (and in the world) has come a long way from pu-pu platters, isolated ethnic enclaves, and cinematic sages speaking fortune-cookie dialogue in broken English. Today nearly 4 million Chinese people (or people of at least partial Chinese descent) live in the United States, and Chinese people may make up close to 5 percent of the Canadian population. What's more, Chinese people now participate in pretty much every aspect of modern American culture — their contributions to schools, neighborhoods, businesses, and local communities are as important and as visible as those of any other American. And, by the way, you just may have heard somewhere that China is now an important global economic and political power, too!

So, what could possibly be a better time for picking up a few pointers on Taoism, one of China's oldest (and most interesting) indigenous religious traditions? If you're not Chinese, learning about Taoism could help you gain some insight into Chinese religious, philosophical, and cultural sensibilities. If you are Chinese, it's a chance to get to know your own background and history a little better. But the funny thing is that even though Taoism has informed much of Chinese identity, it isn't the easiest thing to find. Very few Chinese people in America identify themselves specifically as Taoists, and most communities don't have Taoist temples. And when you do find a Taoist temple or teaching center, you may find that the staff and students consist entirely of non-Chinese people. In other words, despite the unprecedented integration of Chinese in the West, and even with the deluge of "Tao of" readers on bookstore shelves, Taoism is still pretty much a mystery to many people.

## Taoism or Daoism?

Maybe you already know that the first syllable of Taoism is pronounced *dow* (as in the Dow Jones Industrial Average), or that some books spell it *Daoism* rather than *Taoism*. Maybe you've noticed that the capital of China used to be called "Peking" but today is called "Beijing" (even though you still order Peking duck at Chinese restaurants). And textbooks used to call the longtime leader of China "Mao Tse-tung," but today they call him "Mao Zedong." What's going on here?

Part of it is the difference in regional dialects, but the bigger issue is that the sources that regularly deal with things Chinese — texts, newspapers, websites — use two different Romanization systems, which are sometimes in a kind of competition with each other. The Wade–Giles system, which spells *Tao* with a *T*, took hold in the early 1900s and dominated almost all publications for most of the 20th century. However, the Chinese were never nuts about the system and eventually developed *Hanyu Pinyin*, the system with the *D*, in the late 1950s. This one started to pick up international recognition by the early 1980s, though Taiwan initially resisted it, and many areas with large Chinese populations — like American Chinatowns — have been slow to adopt it. In some circles, choosing one system over another could be perceived as making a political statement, but none of that is figuring into the choice for this book. We've gone with *Taoism* for this book because the publisher judged that more readers would recognize *Taoism* than *Daoism*. So, this book uses the older Wade–Giles system, except when referring to place names (like Beijing or Xi'an) where a different spelling will probably be more familiar to most readers.

So, why does the Wade–Giles system spell things with a *T* even though they're pronounced like a *D*? Is this some bizarre code that only nerdy polyglots can understand? There are actually a few reasons:

- ✓ **There's no Chinese alphabet.** Each character has a specific pronunciation (including a particular tone) that you can only know if

someone else (like your parents) teaches it to you; you can't just read the letters and know the exact pronunciation.

- ✓ **There are lots of sounds in Chinese that don't have exact parallels in English.** Every time you read a Romanized Chinese word or name, it's really just an approximation of that word.
- ✓ **Although there is no Chinese alphabet, many characters do have certain phonetic characteristics — calligraphic hints as to how they could be pronounced — and usually, words that are etymologically related sound similar.** For example, some characters that are pronounced *tao* (with a *t* sound) are related and look similar to some that are pronounced *dao* (with a *d* sound). So, the creators of the Wade–Giles system asked a question that would only matter to specialists: How on Earth can we put all the *taos* and all the *daos* close to each other in Chinese-English dictionaries that are arranged alphabetically?

Their solution was ingenious . . . or kind of crazy, depending on how you look at it. Try the following exercise: Hold the open palm of your hand right in front of your face — up close to your lips, but not touching them — and say the English word *tie*. Do you notice that you get a breath of air blowing against your palm? Now say the word *die*. Do you notice that your lips, teeth, and tongue seem to be doing the exact same thing as when you said *tie*, but without the breath of air on your palm? That's because *tie* and *die* are essentially the same words, but one is *aspirated* (that is, breathed with a burst of air), and the other is not. And so, the Wade–Giles architects decided that *t'ao* (with the apostrophe) would be read as written, with the aspirated *t* sound, while *tao* (without the apostrophe) would be read with the unaspirated *d* sound. And — *voilà!* — *tao* is pronounced like *dow!* And that's why *pao* is pronounced like *bow* and *kao* is pronounced like *cow*. You can check out Appendix C for a complete pronunciation guide to the Wade–Giles system used in this book.

## Getting the Lay of the Taoist Land

As you get oriented to Taoism, you quickly find out that there seem to be lots of different kinds of Taoism and Taoists, and that it's often hard to figure out how any one of these "Taoisms" relates to any other. Part of this is that the Chinese aren't always consistent in how they use the terms, and they may even apply them to people and practices that technically aren't really Taoist. It's especially common for people to call various nondenominational family or community customs "popular Taoism" or "folk Taoism," just because they're clearly not Buddhist and no one's quite sure what category to put them in. Certainly, a big part of navigating Taoism is the process of sorting one strain from another.

Along these same lines, Taoism (like every other one of the world's major traditions) changes over time, and not always in a linear fashion that you can chronicle with a nice, neat, century-by-century timeline. If you try to imagine a Taoist family tree, you need to be prepared for lots of gnarled branches, limbs that snap suddenly and then somehow seem to regrow again in some other location, roots that entangle with those of other trees and then become indistinguishable from each other, and oddly shaped fruits that look and taste completely different from other fruits growing on different vines on the very same tree. It is, to put it mildly, a tangled family tree.

The first step to keeping all the Taoisms straight in your mind is to develop a certain working vocabulary for classifying Taoism. This often involves examining the categories you hear most often online and in textbooks — like "philosophical Taoism" and "religious Taoism" — and then moving on to more careful and more nuanced language and divisions. You can find a discussion about all this in Chapter 2.

But nothing makes Taoism harder to understand than approaching the subject with misconceptions — either about Chinese religion in general or about Taoism in particular — and then finding that the stuff you read doesn't make any sense. If you heard somewhere that Taoism is atheistic or agnostic, you'll certainly get confused when you start finding huge collections of deities enshrined at Taoist temples. If you've found inspiration in the *Tao Te Ching*, one of the most frequently translated books in human history, you'll probably be disappointed to learn that it often doesn't have much to do with actual Taoist practice. If you have the idea that Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu taught a spiritual path, it'll no doubt shake you up a bit to discover that the whole concept of *spirituality* is actually a Western (and recent) invention. The good news, of course, is that once you understand the odd confluence of events, the intellectual chain reactions that cemented most of these misconceptions in the Western imagination, you'll get not only new eyes for "real" Chinese Taoism, but also a new perspective on the shape and flavor of the Taoism that's catching on in the West.

Tossing out these types of misconceptions about Taoism opens things up for you to see Taoism on its own terms, and to situate it in its broader context as one ingredient of Chinese religion and culture. Fortunately, Chinese religion is not some alien or wholly other prospect — we’re not dealing with Martians or anything like that here — but it does contain some unexpected surprises. For the most part, the Chinese religious worldview is very pragmatic in its concerns; the Chinese have historically given much more attention to matters of day-to-day living than abstract speculation about the nature of God or the human soul. This involves a strong emphasis on family and regional identity, where family relationships serve as a model for most ethical norms. Chinese religious practitioners ordinarily engage a range of gods and other spirits — irrespective of whether they originate in one tradition or another — who have various specialties, functions, and most important, the ability to influence human affairs. And a number of religious “experts” — priests, diviners, exorcists, and so on — help mediate the interactions between humans and spirits, and officiate at various public and private events. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 3.

## *Delving into the Evolution of Taoism*

If you have an idea that history is a lot of dull stuff — names, dates, facts, and figures — you’re not alone. And trying to memorize a collage of uncoordinated details can be about as snooze-worthy as it gets. Fortunately, you’ll find it hard to nap through the story of Taoism. Colorful characters, dramatic innovations, and unexpected augmentations to the tradition show up at just about every turn! And the more you can fill in the historical background, the more things start to make sense.

### *Taoist origins and development*

The assorted texts, practices, and cultural traditions that we call Taoism had their earliest rumblings close to 2,500 years ago, even though it took several hundred years before any people thought of themselves as Taoists or developed any sense of shared Taoist identity. The tradition more or less began during a period of tremendous intellectual ferment in China, an extended time when numerous philosophical schools contended with one another for intellectual supremacy and political power. The Taoist texts from this period, including Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu*, still rank among the most stimulating and entertaining works in all of Chinese literature. These authors failed to “win” the debates from the Hundred Schools Period (as it is now known), in the sense that they never convinced the political leaders of the time to adopt their teachings, but they did briefly influence the ruling ideology of the early Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) in a short-lived movement called Huang-Lao Taoism, and leave a permanent mark on later Chinese religion and culture (see Chapter 4).

The first documented record of anything we can call a Taoist community or institution took shape a few hundred years after that, and it represents the first sharp right-angle turn in Taoism's history. This all began with the emergence of a charismatic teacher and healer named Chang Tao-ling, who founded a tightly knit society called, alternatively, the Way of the Celestial Masters, the Five Pecks or Rice Sect, or somewhat later, the Way of Orthodox Unity. This group

- ✓ Worshiped Lao Tzu as a divine figure (along with many other deities)
- ✓ Publicly recited the *Tao Te Ching*
- ✓ Believed in the coming of a “new age”
- ✓ Developed both a hierarchical priesthood and series of secretive rituals that continue to shape Taoism today

The community didn't last, but its forms and surviving members mixed and mingled with other people in different regions, and over the next several hundred years the tradition eventually accumulated many new sacred texts (like the Highest Purity and Numinous Treasure revelations), practices (like alchemy), and deities (like the Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning). By the 12th and 13th centuries, many new Taoist sects — like the Correct Method of the Celestial Heart, and the Perfect Great Way — were in competition with one another. I discuss these developments in Chapter 5.

## *Tao now (brown cow)*

Taoism in China suffered terribly during large swaths of the 20th century, to the point that Mao Tse-tung and his ill-conceived Cultural Revolution nearly wiped it out altogether by the mid-1970s. But since then, Taoism has mounted a vigorous comeback, including the restoration of many temples, the resumption of priestly ordination, and the performance of public ceremonies. Although a wide range of people claim various Taoist affiliations — some more legitimately than others — most Chinese Taoism today falls into two distinct denominations or lineages:

- ✓ **The Way of Orthodox Unity:** The liturgical and ritualistic branch that is more common in southern China and Taiwan
- ✓ **The Way of Complete Perfection:** The monastic branch that is more common in northern China

Although these divisions pretty much define Taoism in modern China, the vast majority of Westerners — even those who've read the *Tao Te Ching* for years and fancy themselves enthusiasts of Taoist philosophy — have never heard of either sect. I discuss these sects and compare them with each other in Chapter 6.

Speaking of the West, the history of Taoism isn't limited to China — it has begun to sprout legs and start walking around North American countries as well. The face of American Taoism is very different from that of China, which leads (some) people to debate whether it even “counts” as Taoism. For many years, Taoism's main presence in the West was through texts, including the many (if not always accurate) translations of the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* and creative popular writings like Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh*, though Taoist temples, study centers, and online marketplaces have begun popping up over the last few decades. For the most part, these American venues focus on historically marginal Taoist practices like *t'ai-chi* and *ch'i-kung*, and have found some unanticipated alliances with many of those involved in the New Age Movement. American Taoism often includes other Chinese resources, like meditation, acupuncture, traditional herbal medicine, and even sexual techniques. You can find out about the Western *Tao* in Chapter 7.

## Considering Taoist Ideas

Taoists do think about a lot of interesting things, and many Taoist texts contain some of the most philosophically rich thinking you'll find in any tradition. For the most part, Taoist ideas don't involve litanies of doctrinal formulations that people have to say they believe in order to be good Taoists, as much as observations and interpretations of the world that translate into specific ways that people should act, whether out of their own enlightened self-interest or out of interpersonal obligation. And just as Taoism changes over time and produces contending lineages, the ideas also change over time and vary in accord with the different lineages. You'll always be better off if you make peace with Taoism's internal diversity instead of trying to get everything to fit together into one “essence.”

## *It all begins with the Tao*

You probably already have an idea that Taoism has to do with the *Tao*, just as Christianity has to do with Christ and Buddhism has to do with the Buddha. But Taoism isn't really about a belief in the *Tao* or anything like that. That's because the term *Tao* simply means “the Way,” and it was already part of the Chinese worldview well before Taoism came into existence. What's more, other non-Taoist Chinese traditions lay equal claim to ownership of the term, because almost all expressions of Chinese religion and philosophy in one manner or another have something to do with figuring out the “ways” of the universe (possibly including deities) and what “ways” human beings should follow. And Chinese frequently think of various other “ways” that don't have much to do with religion or philosophy either. In other words, the term *Tao* extends well beyond Taoism, well beyond Chinese religion.

But *Tao* is an especially loaded term in the Taoist context, and discussions of it in the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* waste no time letting you know something funny's going on. First, they tell us that conventional language isn't sufficient for describing it, that those who claim to understand it couldn't possibly have it right, and that dim-witted people who hear about it won't be able to do much more than laugh. And then, they illustrate it through colorful, often paradoxical, figures of speech, and continually remind us how difficult it is to comprehend its mystery. It's as though the authors are in on some secret joke, and they keep redirecting you someplace else every time they think you're getting too close to the punchline. If you're not in a hurry, you may end up hitting your head against the *Tao* for a *very* long time.

Even with all the paradoxes and apparent narrative dead ends, some fairly clear characteristics of the Taoist concept of the *Tao* do come through in the texts:

- ✓ It represents a creative principle, and the authors frequently allude to it through the metaphor of a procreative mother and other feminine imagery.
- ✓ It somehow owes its creative power to being empty, which explains why so much Taoist philosophy deals with discussions of “non-being” or the relationship between “being” and “non-being.”
- ✓ Whatever the *Tao* may be, human beings habitually lose sight of it and need to recover it through a process of *returning* (a process that many people are convinced involves some type of mysticism).

You can get your *Tao* on in Chapter 8.

The Taoist process of following the Way can't really be reduced to one or two things; it's no exaggeration to suggest that every aspect of the Taoist tradition in some measure addresses following the Way, whether it involves praying to deities or engaging in the smelting of metals in a laboratory. But in the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* especially, the concept of *Tao* attaches very closely to a truly mind-boggling principle for moral action: that of *wu-wei*, which people alternately translate as “non-doing,” “doing nothing,” “actionless action,” and dozens of similar phrases. The basic idea here is that although the creative power of the *Tao* lies in its emptiness, humans can only “plug in” to the *Tao* by taking on that very quality of emptiness. This translates into acting in a way that comes not from personal desire or affect, but by emulating the empty, impartial qualities of the *Tao* itself, so you don't even feel like you're the agent of your own action. And to boot, this non-doing is utterly effective — so both the *Tao* and the person who correctly follows the *Tao* “do nothing, yet nothing remains undone.”

The discussions of non-doing introduce a roster of memorable metaphors for accomplishing such a state. The “uncarved block” refers to an object that exists in a natural state of simplicity and perfection, not yet structured (and limited) by human intervention. Bending along the “hinge of the Way” refers to the ability to adapt flexibly and fluidly to the constantly shifting circumstances of existence. And the “mind as a mirror” (which also gets a lot of mileage in

Zen Buddhism) alludes to reflecting and responding to reality as it is, without superimposing any of your own interpretations or motivations onto it. I discuss all this in Chapter 9.

## *The expansion of the Tao*

Although the concept of the *Tao* and the principle of non-doing are profound, provocative innovations, it would be hard to imagine enduring religious communities based entirely on those ideals. First-time readers of the *Tao Te Ching* may be disappointed to learn not only that *wu-wei* in isolation isn't really viable as universal public morality, but also that the text never really functioned as a Taoist "Bible," providing a social blueprint for how people should live their day-to-day lives. To understand Taoism in Chinese culture over the last 2,000 years, you need to look at different ideas and resources.

One development that fits somewhat congenially with the original ideas of *Tao* and non-doing is the integration of *yin-yang* and "five phases" (or "five elements") theory into almost all forms of Taoism. By explaining the function of the *Tao* in terms of interactions of *yin* and *yang*, or more complexly as the cycles of five active "agents" — wood, fire, earth, metal, and water — Taoists eventually came to understand everything from imperial history to medical science through elaborate systems of correspondence and resonance. In Chapter 10, I talk about the nuances of *yin-yang* theory and how that creates the basis for many Taoist practices, including various forms of physical self-cultivation.

The first actual Taoist community believed in a coming "new age" (see Chapter 11), and although the new millennium may never have actually come, Taoists over the next several centuries wrote (or received revelations through) hundreds of new texts. This may come as a surprise if you think the only significant Taoist texts are the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Chuang Tzu*, and *The Tao of Pooh*. In fact, there are nearly 1,500 volumes in the Taoist Canon, the comprehensive collection of books used by various Taoists from different time periods, most of which have never seen the light of day in English translation. The vast majority of these texts don't discuss philosophical matters like the *Tao* — in fact, most of them don't actually *discuss* anything. Instead, they include guides to performing rituals, formulas meant to be recited or chanted, aids to meditation, alchemical manuals, and documents covering a variety of disciplines (like numerology, geography, and medicine). You can find out about the history, contents, and ways of accessing the Canon in Chapter 12.

## *Looking at the Practice of Taoism*

You're probably getting the idea that if there are well over a thousand texts dealing with Taoist practice that most Westerners don't know, it stands to reason that most Westerners don't know much about Taoist practice! In fact,



many people are mistakenly convinced that Taoists have no practices (and no doctrines, no deities, and no clergy, for that matter) of any kind, apart from the vague goal of non-doing. In fact, there's probably no greater "undiscovered country" in Taoism, no territory where scholars are still learning more every day, than the world of Taoist practice. And not coincidentally, there's probably no aspect of Taoism that can be any more difficult to understand.

## *Methods of personal cultivation*

It's hard to tell exactly when something we can categorically recognize as Taoist practice first began, but regardless, it's still pretty clear that many of the earliest Taoist practices took the form of applying techniques of physical and spiritual self-cultivation. Some of these techniques resembled meditation, in that they involved a prescribed posture, emphasis on the development of mental discipline, and sometimes even the familiar Buddhist focus on your own breath. Two practices in particular, both described briefly in the *Chuang Tzu*, involve the systematic de-conditioning of all your cognitive and intellectual machinery, the undoing of destructive mental habits in order to return to the original *Tao*. One of these, "sitting and forgetting," is just what it sounds like: gradually peeling away what you already know through an introspective quiet sitting. A related practice, the "fasting of the mind and heart," involves "starving" your ordinary forms of perception until you can develop an entirely different type of immediately, intuitive perception. I talk about these practices in Chapter 13.

Many of the techniques of Taoist self-cultivation involve training of the physical body, and some of these have goals ranging from basic physical health and longevity to attaining an "immortal" status after death. Taoists haven't always spoken with one voice on matters of life and death, and they almost certainly imported their first immortality practices (and generous amounts of related folklore) from a number of non-Taoist sources, which you can read about in Chapter 14.

Over time, the most important immortality practices had to do with variations on *alchemy* (the concocting and combining of various substances in the laboratory), which adepts believed they could use to cure illnesses, gain the protection of spirits, and, of course, transform their own postmortem status. There have been many kinds of alchemical practices in Taoism, but they fall roughly into two categories:

- ✓ **Exterior alchemy:** The literal alchemy involving preparing and ingesting substances
- ✓ **Interior alchemy:** A practice in which alchemical formulas and instructions serve as metaphors for techniques of cultivating and transforming your body's internal energies

If you're especially interested in Taoist alchemy, check out Chapter 15.

Among the many physical practices in Taoism, a handful that have functioned somewhat on the periphery of the tradition have caught on big time in the West. Practices like *t'ai-chi*, *ch'i-kung*, and a range of other techniques that combine martial arts and spiritual teachings all had loose connections to Taoism in China, but they have, in many ways, become the primary faces of Western Taoism. And because of this, they get their own chunk of this book devoted specifically to them (see Chapter 16).

## *The ritual process*

Thinking about Taoist ritual may seem a little odd if you remember a passage in the *Tao Te Ching* where Lao Tzu seems to be trashing the performance of ritual. But ever since the beginnings of the Way of the Celestial Masters, various forms of ritual — atonement of sins, purification rites, ceremonies on behalf of the dead — have been hugely important in Taoism. When Taoist initiates achieve ordination or advance in priestly rank, they effectively receive authorization to participate in or conduct specific rituals, which almost always involve gaining access to esoteric ritual secrets. Many of the texts in the Taoist Canon actually function as guides or companions to these ritual performances, which is why they're virtually impossible to understand if you just "cold-call" them, but also why they're such a valuable (and understudied) resource for understanding the realities of Taoist practice.

Although most of the rituals have an esoteric component, many are dramatic and colorful, even if you don't understand what's going on. This is particularly true of rites of "cosmic renewal," some of which occur only once every several years, take days to perform, and include the participation of dozens (or hundreds) of priests. In Chapter 17, I try to make some of these impenetrable ritual processes a little easier to understand.

## Chapter 2

# What Is Taoism?

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Encountering Taoism for the first time
  - ▶ Getting familiar with some Taoist terminology
- 

**I**n some ways, the answer to the question, “What is Taoism?” is quite simple. Taoism is a religious tradition that is native to China. It’s about 2,000 years old (though many of the sources that inspired and influenced it go back at least several hundred years before that, so it’s also okay to think of Taoism as about 2,500 years old). Taoism has spread to other parts of Asia, including Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. In recent years, it has found its way into European and North American countries as well.

And yet, Taoism is probably the most poorly understood of all the world’s major religions. This doesn’t mean that you can’t easily find out a lot about Taoism through books, videos, and websites. It means that most of what you *can* find in those places is, unfortunately, confusing, misleading, or just not presented with the necessary background information. This can be incredibly frustrating — you may not always know what sources you can trust for reliable information, you may find different accounts of Taoism that seem to contradict each other, or you may discover that things you already knew about Taoism actually paint a somewhat distorted picture of the tradition.



There is a lot of inaccurate or contradictory information out there about Taoism. Part of the challenge is getting a handle on what information is reliable and figuring out how to make sense of what you learn.

Your first exposure to Taoism may seem a little intimidating, so in this chapter, I offer some pointers to help you navigate the tradition a lot more smoothly. Here, you discover exactly why Taoist resources can initially come off as misleading or confusing, and you pick up some important vocabulary and categories for keeping track of things.

## *Your First Encounter with Taoism*

You may have already had your first encounter with Taoism. Maybe you read the *Tao Te Ching* in a world religion class or came across it while browsing in a bookstore. Or perhaps you've heard someone spin fortune-cookie aphorisms like "He who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know." Maybe you've taken a few *t'ai-chi* lessons or you have a friend who redecorated after practicing the Chinese art of *feng-shui*. Or maybe you've seen some Hong Kong martial arts movies or read *The Tao of Pooh* or any of the dozens of other books that talk about the *Tao* of one thing or another.

But you may also have seen videos online of hundreds of Taoist priests participating in a ritual of "cosmic renewal," or seen pictures of Taoist deities in a book of Chinese art, or heard somewhere that Taoism has something to do with alchemy, acupuncture, the search for immortality, or even quantum physics, whatever that is. And you may be wondering how these all fit together, how these could all be different parts of one religion. Or do they even fit together at all? Could it be that Taoism is one chaotic hodgepodge of beliefs and practices that all just "go with their own flow"?

Part of the problem is simply that a lot of what people say and write about Taoism contains overgeneralizations, personal impressions, and preformed assumptions about the tradition, Chinese religion, and religion in general. But believe it or not, you can blame a huge chunk of the apparent chaos on the term *Taoism*, which is itself ambiguous and which people tend not to use very carefully, even in China.

In this section, I run through an exercise to help you become more attentive to difficulties with the word *Taoism* and illustrate what can go wrong when people aren't attentive to those difficulties. You learn to recognize overgeneralizations and ambiguous language, and maybe even develop some healthy skepticism about things you hear about Taoism.

## *Seeing how Taoists are like Yankees*

You'll probably be happy to know that I don't really want to convince you that Taoists are anything like Yankees, but I do want to show you how the terms *Taoist* and *Taoism* are an awful lot like the term *Yankee*.

If someone were to ask you what a Yankee is or what the word *Yankee* means, your answer would probably depend on a few things, including where you live and whether you like sports:

- ✓ **If you live in the southeastern part of the United States**, a Yankee is a “northerner,” but you almost certainly wouldn’t mean people from Oregon or Montana. More likely, you’d mean people who live in or come from the northeastern part of the country, especially people in or originally from states north of the Mason–Dixon Line, or states that aligned with the Union during the Civil War.
- ✓ **If you’re Mexican or European, or you live in any country that has an unwelcome U.S. military presence**, a Yankee is someone from anywhere in the United States. You can be sure there are plenty of people in Georgia and Alabama who aren’t crazy about being called Yankees!
- ✓ **If you live in New England**, the term *Yankee* may be reserved for people who come from old, established, northeastern families, especially those descended from colonial English settlers. This is the origin of the term *Connecticut Yankees*.
- ✓ **If you live anywhere in the United States (except probably the southeast)**, you can use *Yankee* as an adjective to describe a way to prepare food (“Yankee pot roast”), to solve problems (“Yankee ingenuity”), or even to manage money (“Yankee frugality”).
- ✓ **If you’re a sports fan**, the term *Yankee* can really only mean those guys who play baseball and make a lot of money doing so! Babe Ruth was one real Yankee who probably ate a lot of Yankee pot roast but didn’t practice Yankee frugality.

In other words, the term *Yankee* can mean very different things, sometimes because of specific political or social concerns — things that may end up being only slightly related to each other. And if you hear someone use the term one way when you don’t know that usage or think he means something else, you’re sure to stumble into a comedy of errors. Imagine what would happen if you heard someone say that the Yankees walked a dozen Tigers, when you thought that person was talking about the Civil War! Or if you were in a baseball frame of mind and heard someone say that the Yankees attacked and burned the city of Atlanta!

As you may expect from this exercise, *Taoist* and *Taoism* can also mean a lot of different things, depending on who’s using the words. And just as with Yankees, you’ll want to be careful not to mix up the various things that get called “Taoist” for one reason or another, which may not even be very good reasons. One person may be practicing Taoism by moving to the country, spending more time with nature, and making art out of stones and unfinished wood. Another person may be practicing Taoism by joining a monastery, wearing his hair tied up in a bun, and abstaining from sex. They’re both Taoism all right, but they’re not the same Taoism.

At this point, you’ve probably figured out that you’ll be getting much less of a headache if you start resisting any temptation to try to find any “essence” of

Taoism, or to look for things that all Taoists have in common. In fact, there's probably not a whole lot that everything called *Taoist* has in common (just like New York baseball players don't have a lot in common with pot roast), and things they do have in common may just be coincidental rather than meaningful.



The words *Taoism* and *Taoist* may sometimes refer to very different things. There are, in fact, many different “Taoisms.” Be careful not to assume that something true of one type of Taoism is true of every other type of Taoism. In fact, try not even to think of all these different Taoisms as variations of one Taoism. There really is no *one* Taoism.

## *Playing fast and loose with Taoism*

Just because the word *Taoism* is ambiguous doesn't guarantee that people will use the term more carefully. When you're tuned in to how books and websites make generalizations about Taoism without specifying which way they're using the term or what kind (or kinds) of Taoism they're addressing, you'll start to notice that many of these claims just come off like little slogans or sound bites. Some of the following descriptions may sound familiar to you, and they may actually sound very appealing when you first hear them, but when you listen closely, you'll notice that they don't really say a whole lot:

- ✓ Taoism is a religion that teaches the natural way.
- ✓ Taoism is all about being spontaneous and going with the flow.
- ✓ Taoism imparts an experience that is beyond words.
- ✓ Taoism conveys a universal wisdom.
- ✓ Taoism emphasizes the balance of *yin* and *yang*.
- ✓ Taoists avoid religious dogma and organizations.
- ✓ Taoists are peaceful, calm, and in harmony with the universe.
- ✓ Taoists try to live simple, uncomplicated lives.

Every one of these jingles contains at least a grain of truth and reflects genuine familiarity with some Taoist texts, historical figures, or practices. But they also don't take into account all the ways they *distort* Taoism, the ways they may not apply at all to certain types of Taoism. Yes, one Taoist text cautions that we should avoid government and military affairs, but how does that explain Taoist-led rebellions or Taoist-run states? Yes, Chuang Tzu seems to turn up his nose at institutions of any kind, but then how do we square that with organized Taoist temples that have hierarchies of priests and structured daily rituals? Now that you know there are many different Taoisms, you can bring a much more critical eye to these types of clichés.

## What do you mean there's no such thing as Taoism in China?

It may come as a surprise that the Chinese don't really have a single word that translates into English as "Taoism." In fact, they don't really have a word that translates as "religion" either; they only came up with the word *tsung-chiao* to create a Chinese equivalent of the English word *religion*. This doesn't mean that there isn't really any Taoism, or any religion, in China, but it does say a lot about how Chinese and Westerners think differently about the idea of religion and the various "religions."

Believe it or not, the word *Taoism* is actually a Western invention, coined only within the last couple hundred years. No matter how hard you look, you won't be able to find any English sources from before 1800 that mention Taoism, even though we knew about Chinese religion long before that. Even the word *Christianity* is a lot newer than you might have imagined. But don't worry — the same is true for *Hinduism*, *Buddhism*, *Shintoism*, *Sikhism*, *Jainism*, and a whole lot of other *-isms*! Stranger still, almost every one of the world's major religions originally got its name from "outsiders" — that is, from people who weren't members of that religion. And in almost every case, the name originally carried critical or negative connotations.

Maybe you're wondering if this is just a technicality? Sure, they must have had Taoism, but they just never had a name for it. Just as we all know that Christianity is 2,000 years old, no matter how old the name is. The point here is really not whether a religion existed before it acquired a name, but how naming something can influence the way we think about it. In the West, people only started naming religions during and after the period in Europe that we know as the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, which began in the mid-1600s. During this period, Enlightenment thinkers started to suppose that they could learn almost anything

through reason and scientific inquiry, and that they could organize all that knowledge into orderly and efficient encyclopedic categories. As a result of this approach to learning and knowing, people started to look *abstractly* at their own and other people's religious lives and started thinking of what they were doing as participating in *religious systems*. They began to think of religions as *things*, as coherent and systematic *-isms*. Before that, people recognized that Hindus and Buddhists and Jews all had different beliefs and engaged in different religious practices, but they had never imagined that they were following Hinduism and Buddhism and Judaism, respectively. When you hear people say things today like, "Islam tells you that you have to fast on Ramadan," or "Eating pork goes against Judaism," or "My religion says I can't do this," be aware that these all reflect a way of thinking that is primarily modern and Western. The way we think about religion today is a legacy of the Age of Reason.

So, why does this matter? It explains why our first inclination may be to seek out a religion's "essence," and why it's sometimes difficult to recognize or accept when religious traditions aren't stable, systematic, or internally consistent. Philosophers today often debate whether the "Enlightenment mentality" represents a net plus, but regardless, the key is simply to be careful not to bring "essentializing" habits to an encounter with Taoism. When you get out of the habit of asking, "What does Taoism say about such-and-such?" and instead start asking, "What does Lao Tzu say about such-and-such," or "What do medieval Taoist texts say about such-and-such," or "What does modern Complete Perfection Taoist practice imply about such-and-such," you'll be able to find answers you can trust.