

Daoism



Figure 1: Daoists pray and make offerings at a temple in Hong Kong during the Chinese New Year celebration.

In Chinese the word *dao* means “way,” indicating a way of thought or life. There have been several such ways in China’s long history, including Confucianism and Buddhism. Daoism (also spelled Taoism) is a philosophical and religious tradition that developed in China in ancient times under the influence of ideas credited to a man named Laozi.

Like Confucianism, it has deeply influenced Chinese culture. Daoism began as a complex system of philosophical thought. In later centuries it also

emerged as a communal religion and was integrated into popular folk religion as well.

The fundamental text of Daoism is the *Daodejing* (Classic of the Way of Power), traditionally attributed to Laozi. It was written sometime between the 8th and 3rd century B.C. Another important Daoist work is the *Zhuangzi*, which is named after the sage who wrote the core of the text, in about the late 4th century B.C.

Daoist philosophy speaks of a universal Dao, which is nameless and unknowable, the essential unifying element of all that is. Everything is basically one despite the appearance of differences. Matters of good and evil and of true or false, as well as differing opinions, can only arise when people lose sight of the oneness and think that their private beliefs are absolutely true. This can be likened to a person looking out a small window and thinking he sees the whole world, when all he sees is one small portion of it. Because all is one, life and death are not in opposition to one another but are only two aspects of a single reality. The life of the individual comes from the one and goes back into it.

The goal of life for a Daoist is to cultivate a mystical relationship to the Dao and to act only in harmony with it. Civilization is considered a degradation of the natural order, and the ideal is the return to an original purity. Adherents therefore avoid dispersing their energies through the pursuit of wealth, power, or knowledge. By shunning such distractions, Daoist are able to strengthen the life force within themselves. The longer an adherent lives, the more of a sage the person is presumed to have become. Eventually the hope is to become immortal.

Religious Daoism emphasizes moral teachings and collective ceremonies. Good moral conduct is rewarded with health and long life, while bad conduct results in disease, death, and suffering in the afterlife. There is an array of gods who are administrators of the universe, of which they are a part. From these gods come revelations of sacred texts. Daoist priests perform exorcisms and complex rituals in the communities they serve.

In the more folk-oriented form of Daoism, the religion is part of the everyday lives of the people. The gods are intimately connected with each individual's life as bringers of calamities or givers of bountiful gifts. Each object of daily life has its presiding spirit that must be consulted and appeased.

All types of Daoism have in common the quest for harmony with the universe. They emphasize the individual's and the group's need for unity through mysticism, magic, and ceremony.

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