

Taoism in China

Written by Wang Yi'e

Translated by Shao Da



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Preface

Among the five major existing religions in China (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism), Taoism is the only one originating here. Formed in the second century during the last years of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), its religious belief can be actually traced back to the remote antiquity. For this very reason, it has kept a widespread and far-reaching influence upon the Chinese people across the world.

The second century turned out to be turbulent years for the Eastern Han. People suffering from successive years of wars and famines were eager for peace. During that time, *The Classic of Supreme Peace (Taiping Ching)*, a book deeply influenced by Lao-tzu's Taoist doctrines and advocating immortals worship, began to spread far and wide. Claiming to establish a state of peace and prosperity described in the book, both the Supreme Peace Sect (Taiping) founded by the three brothers Zhang Jiao, Zhang Bao and Zhang Liang and the Five Bushels of Rice Sect (Wudoumi) by Zhang Daoling thus won wide support from peasants.

The Zhang brothers led their disciples to stage an armed revolt, which was eventually suppressed by united warlords. Their Taiping sect was put under a ban. As Zhang Daoling's grandson Zhang Lu

gave himself up later to Cao Cao (the prime minister who actually controlled the court toward the late Eastern Han Dynasty), the Wudoumi sect(also known as the Heavenly Master sect) mainly spreading in Sichuan and southern Shaanxi was able to survive.

Legend has it that Zhang Daoling or Zhang Lu wrote *Annotations by Xiang'er on Lao-tzu's Work*, in which the writer gave a religious interpretation of Lao-tzu's *Classic of the Way and Virtue (Tao Te Ching)* and personified the Tao by referring to it as celestial god Supreme Master Lao. The book also admonished people to do good deeds to prevent disease and avert calamities. It became an important classic of the early Taoism.

Two significant reforms occurred to Taoism in its history.

From the Jin Dynasty (265-420) to the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386-589), as more and more people from high society joined the ranks of Taoist disciples, immortals worship gradually replaced the previous dream of establishing a state of peace and prosperity to become a new goal of Taoism. Ge Hong (284-363), Kou Qianzhi (365-448), Lu Jingxiu (406-477) and Tao Hongjing (456-536) had played important roles in completing this change that took several hundred years. They revised the early Taoism's doctrines while absorbing Confucianism's moral principles and ethics, which won support from upper-class disciples including emperors and noblemen. Thus Taoism became a peer of the influential Confucianism and Buddhism in ancient China, and saw its heyday in the Tang (618-907)

and Song (960-1279) dynasties.

Around the mid-12th century, Wang Chongyang (1113-1170) founded in north China a Taoist sect named Quanzhen stressing self-discipline, while another sect of Jindan emerged in south China. They both absorbed philosophical ideas and health preservation theories from Confucianism and Buddhism, and later merged into a single Quanzhen Sect, coexisting ever since with the Way of Orthodox Unity (Zhengyi), another major sect of Taoism evolving from the Heavenly Master Sect. Priests of Quanzhen Sect had to live a strict religious life, single and vegetarian, living collectively in temples all the year round. In contrast, those from Zhengyi might get married and have children. Usually they lived a secular life, eating meat and holding rites for disciples to exorcise spirits and stave off disasters.

Lao-tzu wrote in his *Tao Te Ching* -- Taoism's main classic: "Tao generates one. One generates two. Two generates three. Three generates all things in the universe." Taoism holds the belief that immortals dominate all things in the world. People can ask for their blessings and protection, and become an integral part of Tao through benefactions and self-discipline. In that way, they can return to nature and eventually become immortals themselves.

Taoism worships all kinds of immortals, including natural gods, ancestral gods, local gods, ethnic

gods and craft gods, as well as all previous enlightened emperors, virtuous and able officials and talented scholars. Guanyin (Avalokitesvara) of Buddhism and many deities in other religions are also worshiped. Like the human society, the immortals' world maintains a rigid hierarchy, in which each deity has his or her own responsibility.

After the 16th century, Neo-Confucianism, a Confucian school of philosophy emerging in the Song Dynasty, began to dominate the ideological sphere. Being discriminated against, Taoism turned to the countryside and gained more popularity there, further merging with Buddhism and folk beliefs.

Taoist organizations gradually declined in the first half of the 20th century, but its doctrines still maintained a wide influence on the Chinese people across the world. Following its founding in 1949, the People's Republic of China has adopted a policy of freedom of religious belief. Along with other religions Taoism has been protected by the country's Constitution. Disciples' Taoist belief has received due respect. Dilapidated temples have been renovated with the aid of governments at different levels. With the value of its ancient classics and theory being re-recognized, Taoism's religious activities have gradually got on the right track.

The year 1957 saw the establishment of the Chinese Taoist Association, which later set up its local branches in all provinces and autonomous regions, major cities including Beijing, Tianjin and

Shanghai, as well as some famous Taoist spots. The association aims at helping the government implement its religious policies and safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of Taoists. It's also responsible to transmit the opinions and suggestions of Taoist personages to competent authorities, and organize them to carry out religious activities and take part in the nation's socialist construction.

Over the half century since its establishment, the association convened seven national congresses. Since 1989 it resumed the liturgies for impartation of Taoist instruction that had been suspended for more than 40 years. The ceremonies, called *chuanjie* in Quanzhen Sect and *shoulu* in Zhengyi Sect, were attended by hundreds of priests from home and abroad. It also founded in 1989 a Taoist Culture Institute and the following year a Chinese Taoist College -- the first of its kind in history, to promote the spread of Taoist culture worldwide and train academic personnel for Taoist research and temple management. The association has also published a large number of Taoist classics and periodicals to carry forward the Taoist belief and present the newest results in Taoist research.

Currently, China has several ten thousand registered Taoist priests and nuns, and thousands of Taoist temples, many of which are places of historic interest and scenic beauty.

Contents

Preface

1. Worship Tradition of Long Standing / 1-12

2. Polytheistic Worship / 13-24

3. Magnificent Taoist Temples / 25-50

4. Solemn Taoist Rituals / 51-64

5. Simple Life Style of Taoist Priests / 65-74

6. Abstruse Doctrines of Taoism / 75-82

7. Temple Activities of Disciples / 83-90

8. Active Taoist Association / 91-96

9. Training of Young Taoist Priests / 97-100

10. Domestic and International Exchanges / 101-112

11. Unique Taoist Art / 113-125

1. Worship Tradition of Long Standing

*T*aoism has been generally acknowledged to be founded early in the second century by "Heavenly Master" Zhang Daoling, who established the Wudoumi sect toward the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Its religious belief can be actually traced back to the remote antiquity. The ancient nature worship and ancestral worship, and especially alchemy and

supernatural legends emerging during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC), as well as teachings of Yellow Emperor and Lao-tzu popular in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), -- all have provided sources for Taoism. Lao-tzu, founder of the Taoist school, has been respectfully referred to as the "earliest ancestor," and his *Tao Te Ching* as the religion's main classic.



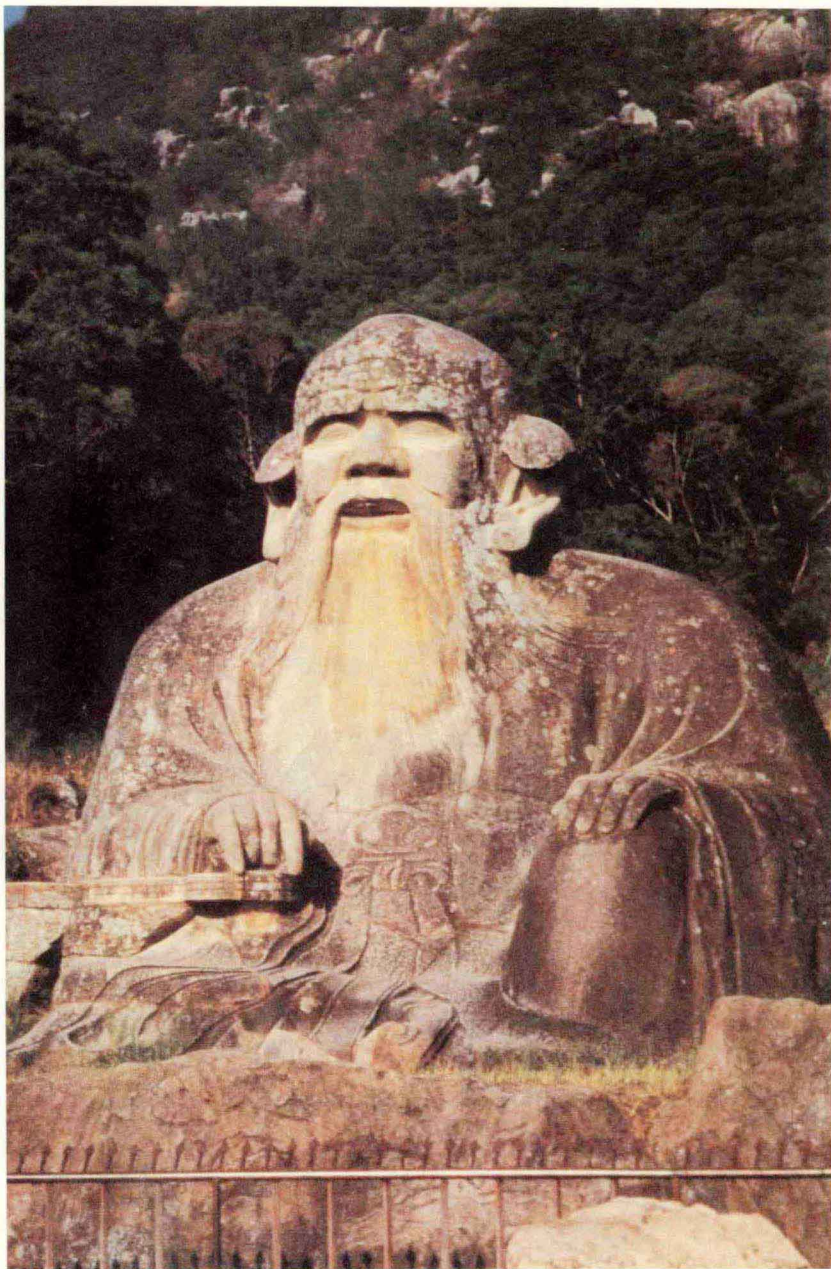
Relief sculpture of Supreme Master Lao
in the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534)

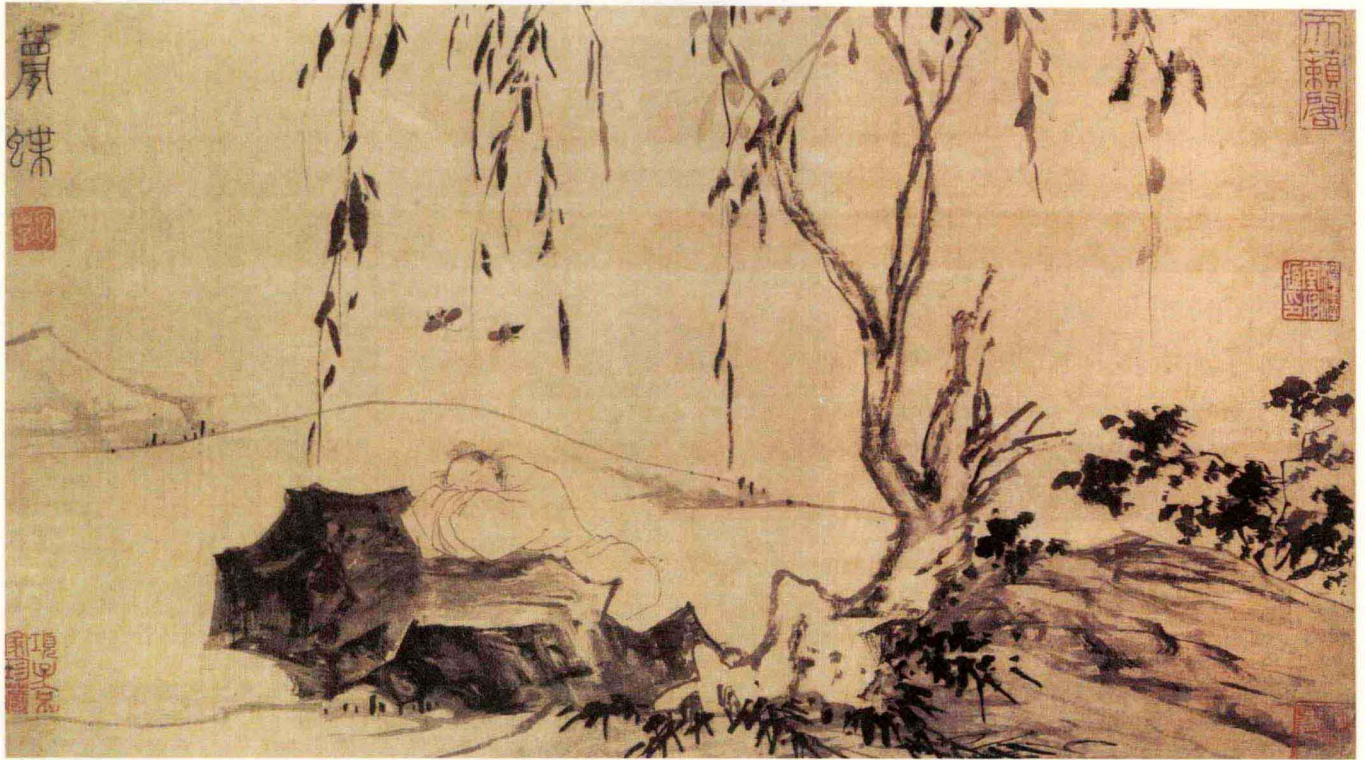


Tombstone of Lao-tzu situated on Mount Daling
in Louguantai Forest Park in Zhouzhi County,
Shaanxi Province

Stone statue of Lao-tzu on Mount Qingyuan in Quanzhou City, Fujian Province (Song Dynasty)

According to Sima Qian's *Historical Records*, Lao-tzu, a famous philosopher and founder of the Taoist school in ancient China, whose original name was Li Er, was a native of Quren Li, Lixiang Township, Kuxian County in the state of Chu (east of today's Luyi County, Henan Province). He styled himself Boyang, and was given the posthumous title of Dan. Once he served as an official historian of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 BC), but resigned later and went westward to Hangu Pass where at the request of Yin Xi, the fort's magistrate, he wrote the five-thousand-word *Tao Te Ching* and established a philosophical system with Tao as its supreme realm. He was respectfully referred to by Taoists of later ages as the "earliest ancestor." His *Tao Te Ching*, Taoism's major classic, has been translated and published in many languages.

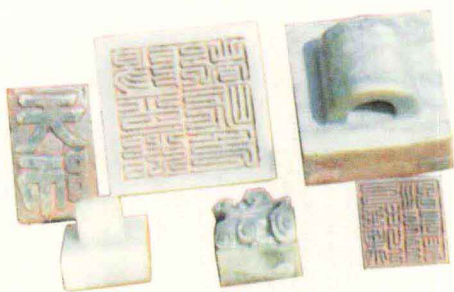




Zhuang Zhou Dreaming Butterflies

Chuang-tzu, or Zhuang Zhou, was a native of Mengcheng in the state of Song (today's Shangqiu City, Henan Province) during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). A philosopher and a representative figure of the Taoist school at that time, he further developed Lao-tzu's thought and established a philosophical system with Tao as the core concept. He was respectfully referred to by Taoists of later ages as "Nanhua Zhenren," and his work, *Book of Master Zhuang*, as "*Nanhua Zhenjing*," which has become an important classic of Taoism.

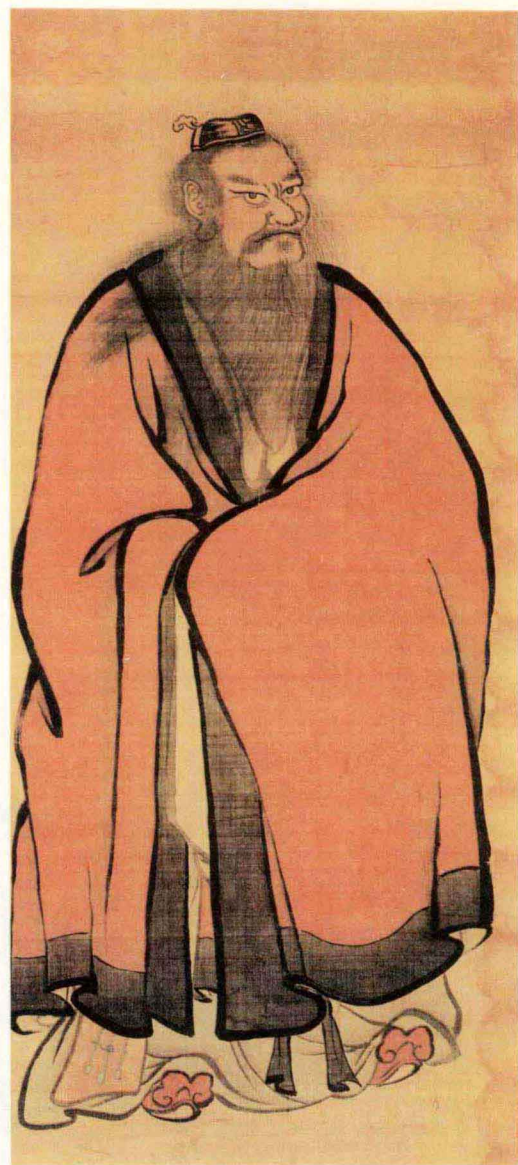
Heavenly Master's jade seals kept in the Heavenly Master's Mansion on Mount Longhu (Dragon and Tiger) in Jiangxi Province



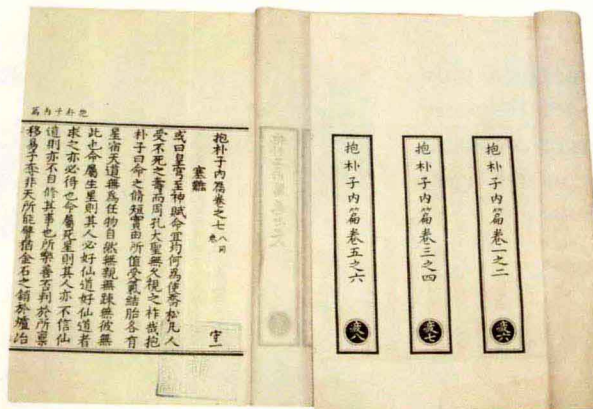
Heavenly Master's family tree



Zhang Daoling (34-156), whose original name was Zhang Ling, was a native of Feng Yi in the state of Pei (today's Fengxian County, Jiangsu Province) during the Eastern Han Dynasty. He styled himself Fuhan (assisting the Han Dynasty). During the reign of Emperor Ming he acted as the magistrate of Jiang Zhou in Ba Jun (today's Chongqing Municipality), but later resigned and lived in seclusion on Mount Beimang (north of today's Luoyang City in Henan Province) to practice the way of perpetual rejuvenation. In the reign of Emperor Shun (126-144) he went to Sichuan with his followers and founded the Wudoumi sect there, regarding Lao-tzu as the patriarch and Lao-tzu's *Tao Te Ching* as the main classic. Wudoumi was also known as the Heavenly Master sect, and thus Taoists of later ages respectfully addressed Zhang as "Heavenly Master." Prime Minister Cao Cao led his army to attack and occupy Sichuan in 215. Zhang's grandson Zhang Lu surrendered to Cao and then moved to north China. Therefore Wudoumi was able to survive and became the orthodox Taoist sect afterward. After the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) it merged with Shangqing and Lingbao sects, which were referred to together as the Way of Orthodox Unity (Zhengyi Sect).



Portrait of Heavenly Master Zhang (by Fan Yi, Ming Dynasty)



Ge Hong's *Pao-pu-tzu* (*Master Embracing Simplicity*)
in the *Collected Taoist Scriptures*

Ge Zhichuan Living in Seclusion (by Wang Meng, Yuan Dynasty)

Ge Hong (284-363), a Taoist theoretician, alchemist and pharmacologist who styled himself Zhichuan, was a native of Jurong in Jiangsu's Danyang during the Three Kingdoms (220-280) period. His well-known *Pao-pu-tzu* is divided into two parts. The first tells about legends of immortals and the way to stay healthy and prolong one's life; the second comments on mundane affairs. Ge acknowledged the existence of immortals, which produced a great impact on the Taoist alchemy of later ages. His book has also provided prized historical materials for studies on the development of medicine and chemistry in ancient China.

In this painting, Ge moves with his family to Mount Luofu for a hermetic life. With simple and unaffected figures walking among high mountains and towering ridges, the painter has created a lofty artistic ambience.

Portrait of Master Zhenbai (by Zhao Zi'ang, Yuan Dynasty)

Tao Hongjing (456-536) of Moling in Jiangsu's Danyang (today's Nanjing), alias Huayang Hermit, styled himself Tongming (brightness), and was given the posthumous title of "Master Zhenbai." A Taoist theoretician, he wrote many classics like *Zhenling WeizhaoTu* (*Illustrated Ranking of the Immortals*), *Zhengao* (*Declarations of the Perfected*) and *Dengzhen Yinjue* (*Concealed Instructions on the Ascent to Perfection*). He introduced ancient China's hierarchy into Taoist doctrines to rank all kinds of immortals, which exerted a significant influence on immortals worship of later ages.





Statue of Lü Yan (wood carving, Ming Dynasty)

Lü Yan, the most widely spread of the Eight Celestials in Taoist mythology, styled himself Dongbin. Legend has it that he lived in the Tang (618-907) or Five Dynasties (907-960) period. He was known as "sword immortal," "wine immortal" and "poet immortal" among the people. During the Song Dynasty he was honored with the title of "Miaotong Zhenren." After the Quanzhen Sect was founded by Wang Chongyang in the Yuan Dynasty, Lü was revered as its patriarch.



Inscriptions by Wang Chongyang on a tablet, kept in the Palace of Chongyang Wanshou in Huxian County, Shaanxi Province

Wang Chongyang (1112-1170), alias Chongyang-tzu, was a native of Xianyang in Shaanxi Province. His original given name was Zhongfu, but he changed it to Zhe after being converted to Taoism. He once practiced Taoism in Liujiang Village of Shaanxi. In 1161 he went to Shandong to preach sermons and took Ma Danyang, Sun Bu'er, Tan Chuduan, Qiu Chuji, Hao Datong, Wang Chuyi and Liu Chuxuan as disciples in succession. Later he founded the Quanzhen Sect of Taoism, maintaining Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism should be treated as equals.