

# Taoism

In our Taoism, the expression "to produce emptiness" contains the whole work of completing life and essence. All three religions (Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism) agree in the one proposition, the finding of the spiritual Elixir in order to pass from death to life. In what does this spiritual Elixir consist? The deepest secret in our teaching. . . is confined to the work of making the heart empty. Therewith the heart is set at rest.

Lu Tung-pin (b. 755 A. D. )

The Secrer of the Golden Flower

## I. LAO-TZU, THE TAOIST SAGE

## The Most Exalted Old Master

LAO-TZU (604 ?-531 B.C.) was the great sage of Taoism, the oldest of the three religions of ancient China. Concerning the date of his birth, suppositions vary from the sixth to the third century. According to Taoist tradition, Lao-tzu was born in Honan province in central China, worked as the keeper of the archives at the court of the Chou dynasty and was an older contemporary of Confucius.'

On account of his official position and great learning, the elderly philosopher was visited by Confucius, then only thirty-two years old. Quite unimpressed by the younger scholar and his teachings, Lao-tzu concluded their discussion saying, "I have heard it said that a clever merchant, though possessed of great hoards of wealth, will act as though his coffers were empty; and that the princely man, though of perfect moral excellence, maintains the air of a simpleton. Abandon your arrogant ways and countless desires, your suave demeanor and unbridled ambition, for they do not promote your welfare. That is all I have to say to you." Shaking his head, Confucius went away, remarking to his disciples, "I understand how birds can fly, how fishes can swim, and how four-footed beasts can run.... But when it comes to the dragon, I am unable to conceive how he can soar into the sky riding upon the wind and clouds. Today I have seen Lao-tzu and can only liken him to a dragon."<sup>2</sup> Lao-tzu must have appeared to Confucius like a speculative dreamer and Confucius must have seemed to Lao-tzu like a busybody,

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<sup>1</sup> Who Lao-tzu was and what he wrote have been a debatable matter in Chinese studies for more than half a century. Was Lao-tzu an historical figure or a legendary one? Did he meet Confucius? Is the *Tao-Te-Ching* his writing? There is no agreement about such problems. At least thirteen different hypotheses have been offered. In the above account, we assume that Lao-tzu actually lived, met Confucius and is responsible for at least the core of the *Tao-Te-Ching*. See Wing-tsit Chan, *The Way of Lao-tzu*, Bobbs-Merrill Co., Indianapolis, 1963, pp. 35-59 for details of the debate. According to him, after 1950 the scepticism regarding Lao-tzu and his book diminished. For another view see the writings of Fung Yu-lan (i.e. *History of Chinese Philosophy*).

Chan, *ibid*, pp. 50-53.

meddling in other people's affairs. <sup>3</sup>

Later, recognizing the decay of his country and disgusted with the Chou emperor, Lao-tzu decided to pursue virtue in a more congenial setting. Riding a water buffalo he sought to leave the kingdom and headed toward Tibet. However, upon arriving at the border he was stopped by the local governor. Realizing that Lao-tzu's departure was a great loss to China, the official requested that the sage leave behind a record of his teachings to benefit the civilization he was deserting. In three days, Lao-tzu returned with a compact book of 5,000 words, the *Tao-Te-Ching*, handed it to the governor, left China and was never heard from again.

The book we know as the *Tao-Te-Ching* is Lao-tzu's original writing plus additions made by later editors whose names are unknown. This book, "a testament to man's at-home-ness in the universe", <sup>4</sup> has been entitled by various translators: the *Book of Reason and Virtue*, the *Path of Virtue*, *Book of the Principle and Application*, the *Canon of Reason and Virtue*, and even *Thoughts on the Nature and Manifestations of God*. <sup>5</sup> This basic text of Taoism can be read in an hour or studied over a lifetime. Wing-tsit Chan notes: "No one can hope to understand Chinese philosophy, religion, government, art, medicine or even cooking without a real appreciation of the profound philosophy taught in this little book."

## Teachings of Lao-tzu

### *Tao*

*Tao* literally means the road, the Way. In the history of Chinese philosophy there have been three major concepts of Tao: Confucius and Mencius defined Tao as the norm for ethics, the moral standard by which man judges his behavior; Lao-tzu and his disciples considered Tao as the source or basic principle of all things in the universe and therefore treated it as the Abso-

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<sup>3</sup> R. Hume, *The World's Living Religions*, Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1924, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Holmes Welch, *Taoism, The Parting of the Way*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1957, p.4

<sup>5</sup> Hume, *Ibid*, p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *Ibid*, p. 3.

lute; later Sung dynasty Confucianist scholars combined these two theories, emphasizing the more theoretical aspects, and identified Tao with the basic metaphysical concept *Li* (reason or principle). In studying the *Tao-Te-Ching*, it is necessary to keep from confusing these three distinct meanings of the term.

According to Professor Fung Yu-Ian, Lao-tzu took the word *Tao*, previously restricted to human affairs as the proper way of conduct, and gave it a metaphysical meaning. For the universe to have come into being there must exist an all-embracing first principle (Tao). Each existing thing has its own individual principle but Tao brings the principles of all these into single agreement. Tao represents the all-inclusive principle whereby all separate things are produced.' As Lao tzu wrote, "Tao is formless yet complete, existing before heaven and earth, without sound, changeless, all-pervading and unfailing, the mother of everything under heaven. We do not know its name, but we term it Tao. Forced to give an appellation of it, I should say it was Great."<sup>8</sup>

In another passage Lao-tzu explains what he means by the greatness or ultimacy of Tao. "Man's standard is Earth. Earth's standard is Heaven. Heaven's standard is Tao." This means Tao is great because it is the first principle through which all things come into being. It is great because Tao's actions are the actions of all things. And it is great because only through Tao are all things possible.

Because Tao is intangible, invisible, incommensurable, Lao-tzu says that it is therefore nameless. It cannot be a thing like a tree, a chair, a man, or "the ten thousand things" which make up our world of sensory experience. Tao is a "shape without shape, a thing without form." "The Tao that may be called Tao is not the invariable Tao." When we try to imagine the reality of the Tao we necessarily begin to limit it, but in actual-

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Fung Yu-Ian, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1952, volume I. p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> *Tao-Te-Ching*, chap. XXV.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. XXV.

ity Tao is limitless. When we give it a name the way we name ordinary objects we make the Tao like them, but in fact it has no restrictions, no boundaries. Tao therefore transcends our faculties of sensory experience and is beyond our rational analysis. Tao is "the Mystery of Mysteries."

Since visible objects have being, Lao-tzu describes Tao as Non-being (*wu*). This, however, only means "Non-being" as opposed to the "Being" of material things. For the *Tao-Te-Ching*, Non-being in reference to Tao does not signify a mere zero, nothingness, an absence of Being. Tao is shadowy and dim yet within it are entities. Heaven and earth spring from Tao. Hence it is both Non-being and Being, the former because it is indescribable, the latter because it is the source of all existence. Non-being refers to the essence of Tao, Being to its function. "The ten thousand things are produced from Being; Being is the product of Non-being."<sup>11</sup>

As the first cause, Tao is the source of everything that exists. "Tao produced Oneness. Oneness produced duality. Duality evolved into trinity, and trinity evolved into the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things support the *yin* and embrace the *yang*. It is on the blending of the breaths of yin and yang that their harmony depends."<sup>12</sup> Various explanations have been given for this important verse," but all scholars agree that it teaches that multiplicity is not the fundamental fact of existence but a secondary and derivative characteristic of reality. Also, that all existing objects (the ten thousand things to be found in our world) are held in balance because of the harmonious polarity of the male and female cosmic principles. Thus, Taoism goes beyond the fact of multiplicity and beyond the duality of the yin-yang philosophy by asserting the primacy of the one Tao.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, chap. I.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, chap. XL.

<sup>13</sup> *Tao-Te-Ching*, chap. XLII (Fung I'u-lan translation).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. R.B. Blakney, *The Way of Life*, Mentor Book, N.Y., 1955, p. 95 and Y.C. Yang, *China's Religious Heritage*, Abingdon-Cokesbury, N.Y., 1948, pp. 150-151.

*Te (Virtue)*

*Te* has been defined as character, virtue, influence, moral force. Literally, the Chinese ideograph means "to go straight to the heart." *Te* therefore involves inner righteousness, a harmony of a man's outward effect and the inner effect of his self. In this sense, there is a definite moral flavor to the term and so *Te* has been compared to the law of karma."

Yet the Chinese concept goes far deeper. *Te* refers to the inner dynamic constitution of every existing being—the basic magnetic force which makes a creature what it is and gives it power. *Te* is the vibrant concentration of energy which characterizes the vitality of a man. *Te* denotes the psychic magnetism of the human personality—a man's charisma, so to speak. Because of *Te* an individual has a distinctive personality and can exert influence over others.<sup>15</sup> "*Te* is what individual objects obtain from Tao and thereby become what they are.... *Te* is Tao dwelling in objects. Tao gave them birth. *Te* reared them."

*Wu wei (actionless activity)*

Since all men are by nature gifted with *Te* because their original nature comes from the Tao—and preeminently endowed with *Te* is the sage—a person is virtuous when he merely lets his inner radiance shine forth. In contrast to the warlords of ancient China who relied solely upon military force, the legalists who believed in legislating goodness, and the Confucian teachers who gave advice about how to reform the government, the *Tao-Te-Ching* favors "doing without doing, acting without acting"—*wu wei*. If a man is still, quiet, passive and receptive, the Tao will act through him. Because he is filled with *Te*, a sage influences the world by his very presence. He does not need to teach or get involved in programs for human betterment or busy himself with trying to change his society. Just by being himself he will enlighten his fellowmen.

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<sup>15</sup> A. Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, Grove Press, N.Y., 1958, p. 120.  
Blakney, *Ibid.* pp. 38-39.  
Fung Yu-lan, *Ibid.*, p. 180.

*Wu wei* does not necessarily imply avoiding all action. What Lao-tzu opposed was the reformer's attempts to change nature. What he laughed at was the statesman's efforts to improve the Tao. When Confucius told Lao-tzu how he wanted to reform society on the basis of "goodness and duty," the old sage advised him to study how nature works, how heaven and earth maintain their course, how the sun and moon give light, and how the trees grow. If you follow the path that the Way of Nature (Tao) sets, said Lao-tzu, you will no longer need to go round laboriously advertising goodness and duty, like a towncrier with his drum, seeking for news of a lost child. In Lao-tzu's opinion, reformers like Confucius were trying "to disjoint men's natures."<sup>7</sup>

According to the *Tao-Te-Ching*, many kinds of action are natural, spontaneous, and therefore innocent. Eating and drinking, making love, ploughing a field, planting rice—such acts are natural and in conformity with the Tao. Hostile, aggressive acts run counter to the Tao and should hence be avoided. When men try to force others to be good, when they impose duties, when they seek to dominate or subjugate their fellows, they are defying the natural order and inevitably upset the harmony decreed by the Tao. As Lao-tzu complained about Confucius, in the name of bettering men all he does is break their bones.

In terms of the ancient yin-yang philosophy, Lao-tzu stressed the overlooked and ignored virtues of the yin. When the rulers, the warlords and the statesmen were overemphasizing the masculine principle (yang), especially its reliance upon mastery, control and domination, the *Tao-Te-Ching* reasserted the equally valuable virtues of the feminine principle (yin).<sup>8</sup> Quite specifically Lao-tzu extolled "the mystic female."<sup>9</sup> Repeatedly he urged men to imitate the valley, to be like the water, to be open and receptive rather than possessive and domineering.

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<sup>7</sup> An anecdote from Chuang-tzu, quoted by A. Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1939, pp. 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> R.B. Blakney, *Ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Tao-Te-Ching*, chap. VI.

What is of all things most yielding (water)  
Can overwhelm that which is of all things most hard  
(rock).  
Being substanceless it can enter even where there is no  
space;  
But that is how I know the value of action that is  
actionless (wu wei).  
But that there can be teaching without words,  
Value in action that is actionless,  
Few indeed can understand. <sup>20</sup>

Because Lao-tzu lived in the declining years of the Chou dynasty and the *Tao-Te-Ching* is believed to have achieved its present form during the Warring States period (403-221 B.C.) Taoism was intended to provide advice to rulers of a new China. In Lao-tzu's opinion, the doctrine of *wu wei* is a practical political philosophy. Through *wu wei*, the sage can become the model for the perfect ruler, the ideal leader. Lao-tzu would have the people act on the ruler, not the ruler on the people. The wise ruler "takes the people's opinions and feelings as his own." <sup>21</sup> He attracts them by what he is, not so much by what he does. "In this way everything under Heaven will be glad to be pushed by him and will not find his guidance irksome." He must let his mind "penetrate every corner of the land" but "never interfere." He must "rear" the people, "feed them" but "not lay claim upon them, control them but never lean upon them, be chief among them but do not manage them." <sup>23</sup> The ruler should "require hatred with virtue," because that is the best way to get what he wants. In all his actions he should demonstrate how "the soft overcomes the hard and the weak the strong." <sup>24</sup> as water permeates the earth and wears away even solid stone.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, chap. XLIII, Waley translation.

<sup>21</sup> *Tao-Te-Ching*, XLIX (Waley trans.).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*. LXVI.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, X.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, XXXVI.



## Original Nature: the Uncarved Block

Lao-tzu believed that in ancient times, sages abounded and man lived in paradise. Men possessed an original nature which was pure, totally free from hostility and aggression. This he compared to an "uncarved block" (1<sup>st</sup> 11), a piece of wood which exhibits its intrinsic, unmarred natural beauty. When men were unadorned, unmutated by social regulations and free of the paint of conventional morality, Confucius' 3300 rules of social etiquette were not necessary. Ancient man—whose example is set up as the ideal—did not belong to a complex social structure.<sup>25</sup> Living in small settlements which consisted in all likelihood of but a single family, man had few desires: "to be contented with his food, pleased with his clothing, satisfied with his home, taking pleasure in his rustic tasks."<sup>26</sup> "Since there were almost no social pressures, there could be no aggression against the individual: no repressive morality, no onerous duties to the community, no oppressive punishments. Because the society was not aggressive in its demands, it did not provoke hostility or aggressiveness on the part of its members. By eating, a man satisfied his physical needs; he "filled his belly and weakened his ambitions." For him money and power, learning and reputation did not even exist. Completely satisfied, man was so content that, even though "the neighboring settlement might be so near he could hear the cocks crowing and the dogs harking, he would grow old and die without ever having been there."<sup>27</sup>

If an earthly paradise existed in the past, Lao-tzu believed it was also always a possibility for the present. As man was originally created by Tao pure and good, like an uncarved block of wood, so are children always born simple, unmarred and virtuous. As Lao-tzu asked, "in controlling your vital force to achieve gentleness, can you become like the newborn child?"<sup>28</sup> The sociologist Max Weber notes, for Lao-tzu the essential goodness of human nature was the self-evident point of depar-

<sup>25</sup> Cf. J.J. Rousseau's concept of "the noble savage."

<sup>26</sup> *Tao-Te-Ching*, LXXX (Waley).

<sup>27</sup> H. Welch, *Taoism, The Parting of the Way*, p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> *Tao-Te-Ching*, X (Waley).

ture.<sup>29</sup> Man is born good; only society can mar and distort his original nature. Hence, the individual who can recover this primordial state—symbolized by the uncarved block and the newborn child—has learned wu *wēi*, the secret of active inaction.

Lao-tzu's formula for uncovering our original nature—thus, making the Way (Tao) for an ideal kingdom on earth—is to reduce the desires foisted upon us by a fallen society: desires for money, power and status. Riches, hard to obtain, get in the way of their owner." Favor and disgrace drive men out of their minds. When a ruler's subjects get fame, they become distracted. When they lose influence, they turn distraught.'" If a man depends upon what others think of him and the position he temporarily holds in society, he can hardly be expected to keep a balanced mind or be able to express his original nature.

However, Lao-tzu seems to go beyond this to suggest that we should not esteem duty, law, or knowledge of right and wrong. These too, in his opinion, are useless trappings of a fallen society. He would therefore eliminate from his projected ideal state all that does not come straight from our individual understanding of the Tao. As he put it, "Banish wisdom, discard knowledge, and the people will be benefited a hundred fold: banish human kindness, discard morality, and the people will be dutiful and compassionate. "<sup>32</sup> While many of his critics have accused Lao-tzu of being an anarchist, probably all he really opposed was the pseudo-wisdom of the learned mandarin class, the legislated morality of the government and the "benevolence" of those who subjugate the people for their own good, as they put it. Relying on the intrinsic goodness of all men, Lao-tzu protested against an oppressive State, a repressive system of ethics and the meddling activities of so-called "do-gooders" in the established bureaucracy. Once man was liber-

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<sup>29</sup> M. Weber, *The Religion of China*, Free Press, Glencoe, III., 1951, p. 187.

<sup>39</sup> *Tao-Te-Ching*, XII.

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<sup>32</sup> *Tao-Te-Ching*, XIX (Waley).

ated from the artificial and unnecessary restrictions of society, he would be free to express his original kindness, compassion, purity and goodness.

### *Government by Tao*

The doctrine of *wu wei* was in part a reaction to China's age of troubles. The period of the Warring States was a time in which armies marched all over the land and wars were frequent. The Chou dynasty civilization was in shambles. Looking about, Lao-tzu beheld reprisal following reprisal, so asked himself, Can this ever be stopped?<sup>33</sup> The *Tao-Te-Ching* was written for leaders who had to cope with injustice, tyranny, pillage and slaughter. Speaking to the government authorities, Lao-tzu asked, "When the people do not fear death (because they had seen so much of it), how can one frighten them with death?"<sup>34</sup> The leaders must rule a large country as if they were "cooking small fish."<sup>35</sup> As an ancient Taoist commentary points out, when cooking small fish, the intestines are not taken out and the scales are not scraped off. One does not dare to scratch them for fear that they might go to pieces. Similarly, when governing a country if one starts meddling around, then the subjects become confused.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout Chinese history, Taoism has often been the philosophy of a disaffected minority from the upper classes and the suppressed peasants, a protest embodied in the secret societies which plotted revolts against oppressive rulers. The ideal form of government, as Lao-tzu envisions it, is a system of *laissez faire*. By interfering in the people's affairs as little as possible, "they will transform spontaneously and the world will be at peace of its own accord."<sup>37</sup>

Chuang-tzu, Lao-tzu's most prominent disciple, explained

<sup>33</sup> Welch, *!bid*, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Tao-Te-Ching*, chap. LXXI V (Waley).  
*Mid*, chap. LX.

<sup>36</sup> *Ho-Shang-Kung's Commentary on Lao-tse*, Artibus Asiae, Ascona, Switzerland, 1950, p. 222.

Wing-tsit Chan, *!bid*, p. 15.

the proper principles of the ruler and ruled in terms of the facts of nature. In nature, considered apart from man, there are degrees of honor. The "dome of Heaven," for example, is of greater dignity than the "pavement of Earth." So, likewise, in the case of man there are exalted positions and humbler ones, a class of rulers and a class of the ruled. In a family there is the head of the household and its members. The ruled are those who perform the inescapable taskwork; the rulers are those who direct this activity. However, according to the Taoists, rulers can only expect success if they rule "lightly from afar, so lightly that the reins of government might be threads of gossamer in their hands."<sup>38</sup>

It is important to note that Lao-tzu was not against government per se, but only bad government. Like Confucius, like all Chinese, he took for granted the positive value of government. For the Taoist, the worth of a civilization ultimately depends to a considerable degree upon the worth of the ruler." Lao-tzu does not believe in escaping from the world. Nowhere in his writings is displayed any active antagonism to the world or religiously-motivated flight from society."

Taoism, like Confucianism, looked forward to a golden age when harmony and tranquility would prevail, a perfect and ideal state in which everybody would be happy. The great difference is that Confucianism magnified man's role in constructing such a perfect social order, while Taoists minimized man's role by comparison with the vastness and majesty of nature. More specifically, Lao-tzu's ideal State was to be found in returning to the uncorrupted state of nature; whereas Confucianism sought to build the good society by continually improving upon man's original barbarism through the gradual development of civilization.<sup>41</sup> Confucius was an apostle of culture, Lao-tzu

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<sup>38</sup> Edward Herbert, *A Taoist Notebook*, John Murray. Ltd., London. 1955, pp. 27-28.

<sup>39</sup> Max Weber, *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 186.

" Yang, *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158.

was an advocate of naturalism.<sup>42</sup> The former wanted to reform the world through moral education; the latter by contrast urged men to return to the Origin, the Tao.

## II. CHUANG-TZU

Following Lao-tzu was his even more brilliant disciple, Chuang-tzu (369-286 B.C.), a contemporary of the Confucian philosopher Mencius. Often called China's greatest philosopher, Chuang-tzu took the basic ideas of the Taoists, refined them and expressed their abiding truth in a series of dialogues whose literary form is equal to that of Plato.

Chuang-tzu agreed with Lao-tzu in his concept of the Tao as an all-embracing reality. For him there is not a single thing without Tao. When asked to specify where Tao could be found, the sage replied that it was located in the ant, the grass, the earthenware tile.<sup>1</sup> Just as water can be found in many places—the sea, a lake or an ordinary ditch—so the Tao is the one substance which can be found everywhere under different names.

In Chuang-tzu's opinion, nature is a process of ceaseless change. Everything is in perpetual movement—like a galloping horse. Nothing remains constant, hence, one must recognize that the evolution of nature, symbolized by the endless circle, is the basic fact of existence.<sup>2</sup>

As part of a larger universe, men can attain happiness by following their specific innate natures. Liberate your instincts and follow the Tao in a life of unadorned and spontaneous simplicity, Chuang-tzu advised. Each individual has his own special likings. No one should be forced to fit a pattern set by others. To be in harmony with Nature is the secret of obtaining happiness but each person must express his uniqueness rather than be forcibly made to conform. Chuang-tzu therefore con-

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<sup>42</sup> J.J.L. Luyvendak, *The Way and Its Virtue*, John Murray, Ltd., London, 1954, p. 11.

Burton Watson, ed., *Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1970, pp. 240-241.

<sup>2</sup> Fung Yudan, *Ibid.* pp. 221-245.

demned all fixed standards which men should obey. As he put it, while fish are made to live in water, men will die if submerged in it for any length of time. When they are free to express themselves in a spontaneous fashion there will be no need for oppressive government or repressive social institutions.

To oppose the Confucian administrators, Chuang-tzu told the story of the Marquis of Lu and a bird he had captured. Determined to help the bird, the nobleman gave it wine to drink, played classical music for its entertainment and sacrificed an ox for it to eat. Naturally, in spite of all this loving concern for its welfare, the bird was dead within three days. The Marquis treated the bird as one would treat himself, and not as a bird would treat a bird. Similarly, the Confucian reformers try to make all men conform to their standards of "human-heartedness" and "righteousness."<sup>3</sup> Though undoubtedly actuated by love for the people, they ignore the different constitutions which nature has given to man. For the State to make people good is like putting a halter on a horse or a string through an ox's nose; these things may seem like benefits to the masters but they serve no useful purpose for the horse and the ox. As Chuang-tzu asked, why attempt to lengthen a duck's legs because you think them short or cut off part of a crane's legs because to you they look too long? In nature the long is never too much and the short is never too little.<sup>4</sup>

Chuang-tzu taught the value of complete liberty and equality. There should be no artificial restraints put on individuals. Men differ and their differences must be respected. Who can say what is the right way to live, when eels thrive in damp places and monkeys like to dwell in trees? What is *proper* food in a world where men eat meat, deer eat grass, owls feed on mice, and insects enjoy eating dead snakes? Or how can we be so sure of our standards of beauty? Men may praise two women as the most attractive creatures; but at the sight of them, fish dive deep into the water, birds soar high in the sky, and deer hurry away.

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<sup>3</sup> Chuang-tzu, *Collected Works*, XVIII.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.

Of these four, who truly recognizes the beautiful? By what right can man say his notion of beauty is superior to that of the deer or the bird? According to Chuang-tzu, all our rules of goodness and paths of right and wrong have become hopelessly snarled or jumbled because we fail to recognize the natural differences among individuals.<sup>5</sup>

Right and wrong are purely relative. From the standpoint of Tao, nothing is valuable or worthless in itself. Hence, one should not be bigoted in his opinions or one-sided in his conduct. From the perspective of Tao, everything is equal to everything else. So, as Chuang-tzu advises, we should be dispassionate, impartial, recognizing the equality of all things and holding all things in our embrace. Let us forget the artificial, arbitrary, merely conventional distinctions between right and wrong; harmonize all differences within the boundary of nature and trust in the spontaneous process of natural evolution. Let us find enjoyment in the realm of the infinite which transcends all such limited social distinctions!<sup>6</sup>

Although the central theme of Chuang-tzu's writings can be summed up in the single word "freedom," the Taoist sage was also interested in showing men how to be contented. According to Chuang-tzu, those who quietly follow the course of Nature will not be affected by either sorrow or joy. The wise man knows how to control his emotions by means of reason.<sup>8</sup> First he learns to disregard worldly matters; then he understands how to ignore external things. Finally, when he becomes fully enlightened he can stop worrying about his own vision of the One (Tao). As he perfects himself, the sage can maintain his tranquility, no matter how great the disturbances which occur around him. For this philosopher, it is important that men accept the fact of change. We cannot hold on to anything forever. By trying to do so we subject ourselves to the experience of unhappi-

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, II.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>8</sup> Burton Watson, introductory essay to *Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 3.

· Fung Yu-ian compares Chuang-tzu to Spinoza in this matter.

ness. Chuang-tzu points out that when a young girl was captured by invading soldiers she wept for the loss of her former way of life. But soon she was brought to the palace of the king, lived the life of a princess and regretted that she had ever cried over her capture. Why lament the inevitable fact of change? How can our fortune be improved without change? "What an incomparable bliss it is to undergo these ceaseless transformations!"<sup>9</sup>

Besides accepting the inevitability of change, the sage identifies with everything in the universe. Since the universal Tao has no beginning or end, by uniting with it a man will participate in immortality. The universe is eternal, and so are we, when we realize our union with it. One reaches eternity through an experience of mystical enlightenment in which one sees the unity of all things. Thus, the individual becomes one with the All. When a man awakens to the all-embracing Tao, he says, "Heaven and Earth came into being with me together, and with me all things are one."

Chuang-tzu calls the highest goal "the fast of the mind" or "sitting in forgetfulness." By disregarding worldly matters and not being disturbed by external things, the True Man sleeps without dreaming and wakes up without worries. He neither loves life too much nor fears death. He receives with delight anything that comes to him. He lives calmly, feeling no resistance. Death is only the natural result of life; to rebel against it or feel bitter about it will merely strain the emotions to no effect.

When a friend was surprised to discover Chuang-tzu singing soon after his wife died, the Taoist philosopher replied that originally his wife had been lifeless, had no form and lacked all substance. For a time she had substance, form and life. Now, she had merely changed again—exactly as spring, summer, autumn and winter take place in the natural world. Why be upset? Why mourn? For one to weep and wail while she sleeps would be to show oneself ignorant of fate."

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<sup>9</sup> Chuang-tzu, *Ibid*, VI.

"Fung Yu-lan, *Ibid*. p. 241.

"Chuang-tzu, *Ibid*. XVIII.



From realizing oneness with the universe the sage achieves absolute freedom. If life and death are only two aspects of the natural process and the distinction between good and evil is only relative, man frees himself from dependence upon anything. He no longer tries to rely on transient riches, fame, power, or even love, as a foundation for happiness. The perfect man is like a free spirit. Were the great lakes to burn up, he would not feel hot. Were the rivers to freeze solid, he would not be cold. Were the mountains to be split by thunderstorms, he would not be frightened. As a pure spirit, he would simply ride the clouds, as it were, and wander beyond the seas. If neither life nor death can affect the True Man, of course, he does not worry about the difference between what benefits him and what is harmful."

Some of Chuang-tzu's ideas vaguely resemble those of the Chinese hermits who tried to escape from the world. However, the Taoist philosopher was no advocate of the solitary life of the recluse. Chuang-tzu denied that one could be free of all entanglements. Instead of fleeing society, the Taoist should do what he must, without praise or blame. He should be ready to change with the times, act spontaneously, using harmony as a measure. Above all else, the True Man devotes himself to "using things as things, and not being used as a thing by things."

### **III. VARIETIES OF EARLY TAOISM**

Historically, Taoism refers to a religion composed of several very heterogeneous elements. According to the Taoists themselves their faith goes back far earlier than Lao-tzu's time to the reign of the legendary "Yellow Emperor" who ruled China in the very distant past. While this claim is not literally true, it rightly indicates that the roots of Taoism may be found as early as the Shang period (circa 1300 B.C.).<sup>1</sup> Although Lao-tzu was the founder and great sage of Taoist philosophy, impor-

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. II.

<sup>1</sup> Eking Yu-Ian, *Ibid.* p. 245; cf. Chuang-tzu, chap. XX.

<sup>1</sup> Werner Eichhom, *Taoism*, in R.C. Zaehner, ed., *Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1967, p. 385.

tant elements in the Taoist cult predate his work by many centuries.

In addition to the *Tao-Te-Ching* which was made scripture, Taoism was interested in the pseudo-science of alchemy, exotic herb medicines, breathing exercises, a cult of wine and poetry, revolutionary secret societies, incantations and amulets, the search for the famed Isles of the Blest, and the establishment of a theocratic state in China.

### **The Hygiene School**

Since all Chinese believed that living as long as possible is a much desired blessing, some Taoists devoted themselves to the search for medicines which would guarantee longevity. These priests became peddlers of herb tonics which were supposed to rejuvenate the elderly, cure dangerous diseases and bestow occult powers. To assure longevity these herb doctors also recommended special breathing exercises and gymnastics. Taoists taught that if a person practiced certain breathing techniques, exercised properly, followed a special diet and reinforced his natural powers with appropriate drugs, he could become an "immortal."

### **Yin-yang Philosophy and the Five Elements School**

From early times there were attempts to explain the phenomena of the universe in terms of two cosmic forces which represent female (yin) and male (yang), darkness and light, soft and hard, inactivity and activity. Everything in the world was supposed to result from the interaction, conflict or harmony of the yin and yang principles. As early as 780 B.C., a disastrous earthquake was attributed to the domination of the yin by the yang.<sup>2</sup> Since there was also a widespread assumption that there is a mutual interaction between the ways of nature and the conduct of man, the ruler's acts were supposed to affect the state of the physical world. Hence, it was important for men to know

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<sup>2</sup> Ring Yu-Ian, *Ibid*, p. 32.

how to harmonize the yang and yin principles.

In the *Tao-Te-Ching*, scholars have discovered traces of an ancient Chinese belief that "the gate of the dark female" is the origin of all things. Men then worshipped an earth or water goddess (the Mystic Female) who gives birth to the visible creation. During the pre-Christian era Taoists gave preference to the yin, represented by the element water. Because of this, rest was considered prior to motion, and tranquillity to action. According to traditional Chinese thought, silence, humility and profound peace are the characteristics of the earth and water, as opposed to the active, aggressive qualities of the sun, the heavens and the yang. After the time of Lao-tzu, however, the exclusive rights of the cosmic earth mother were balanced with their opposites in the yin-yang philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Often connected to the yin-yang concept but originally separate from it was another naturalistic explanation of the universe known as the five *elements* theory. According to its advocates, the five agents—metal, wood, water, fire and earth—operating with complete regularity, motivate and govern all growth and change in the physical world. The five elements are not to be thought of as physical substances like the wood we can see or water we drink but are cosmic forces which dominate certain periods of time according to a fixed plan. These agents control our world in the order in which they were believed to "beget" each other: wood produces fire, fire produces earth, earth produces metal, metal produces water. Wood controls the season of spring, the color green and the direction east. Fire is assigned to summer, the color red, and the direction south. Metal dominates autumn, its color is white, and its direction is west. Water controls winter, the color black, and the direction north. Since there are only four seasons, earth was placed in the center, aiding the other elements, and given the color yellow.

According to the five elements theory, numerous correspondences in the natural world can be derived by analogy. All facets of the spiritual world and physical world can be thus clas-

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<sup>3</sup> W. Eichhom, *Ibid.*, p. 386.

sified in terms of their relationship to the five basic agents. Some of these patterns of interrelatedness are seen in the following table:

Wood	Fire	Earth
Spring	Summer	.....
Benevolence	Wisdom	Faith
Number 8	7	5
East	South	Center
Jupiter	Mars	Saturn
sheep	fowl	ox
spleen	lungs	heart
scaly creatures	feathered ones	naked beings
wheat	beans	millet (type A)
sour taste	bitter	sweet

Metal	Water
Autumn	Winter
Righteousness	Decorum
9	6
West	North
Venus	Mercury
dog	pig
liver	kidneys
hairy	shell-covered
hemp	millet (B)
acid	salty'

Although it is easy to criticize some of the details of the five elements theory, the important fact is that Taoist philosophers were concerned to find an overall pattern by which all the different aspects of creation could be related and

explained. On the whole Taoism, far more than its rivals, promoted scientific investigation, because of its reverence for the natural world and its belief that the one Tao was the ultimate reality.

### **Later Taoist Philosophers**

*Huai-nan Tzu (d. 122 B.C.)*

Liu An, the Prince of Huai-nan, was considered the most eminent Taoist philosopher of his time. Known mainly for his diligence in reiterating and elaborating the ideas of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, he also served as the wealthy patron of thousands of scholars and prepared the way for the neo-Taoist school of the third and fourth centuries A.D. He and his scholarly friends produced a lengthy work on metaphysics, astronomy, government, military strategy, etc., which was simply entitled *Huai-nan Tzu*.<sup>5</sup>

There is not much which is distinctive in Liu An's philosophy. His concept of the Tao is like that of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. As for his general cosmology, it resembles the standard doctrine of the later Confucianists. Nevertheless, one idea is worthy of note. According to *Huai-nan Tzu*, Heaven, earth, infinite space and infinite time are the body of a single person, and the space within the six cardinal points of the compass is the form of one man. Because man is the microcosm of the universal macrocosm, the sage can recognize his oneness with all things and attain harmony with the Absolute.<sup>6</sup>

*Yang Hsiung (53 B.C.-18 A.D.)*

Yang Hsiung, a Taoist metaphysician of some note, although a poor man whose public career was an undistinguished one, shows how Taoism reacted to and improved the dominant Confucian philosophy. Mencius (371-289 B.C.) had stated flatly that man's nature was basically good, whereas Hsun Tzu (298-238 B.C.) had contended that human nature was evil and had to

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Huai-nan Tin, *Tao, the Great Luminant*, Kelly and Walsh, Shanghai, 1934.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. W. Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, 1963, p. 308.

be corrected. Yang Hsiung, in typical Taoist opposition to simplistic Confucian teachings, declared that man's nature is a mixture of good and evil. Those who cultivate the moral aspect will become virtuous and those who let the lower aspect dominate will become evil. Each individual rides a horse which can carry him in any direction. His *ch'i* (vital force) has no set goal. Therefore the superior man must study hard and act with earnestness. His actions should be based on careful planning.<sup>1</sup> Avoiding the extreme positions set forth by Mencius and Hsun Tzu, Yang Hsiung represented a real advance in the Chinese philosophers' understanding of human nature.

At a time when many of his fellow Taoists were saying that some men had actually found the secret of living forever, Yang Hsiung denounced such interest in so-called "Immortals." Some Taoists talk so much about the existence of those who are supposed to be able to conquer death that many believe there must be some truth to the notion, he said. When asked if he himself believed in the existence of Immortals, Yang Hsiung replied that we should stop talking about such matters but rather concentrate on practical questions like loyalty or filial piety.<sup>2</sup> In this respect the philosopher concurred with the general attitude of Confucius in regard to the supernatural, yet was also in agreement with Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu who advocated indifference to the problem of life or death.

In metaphysics, Yang Hsiung referred to Tao as "the Supreme Profound Principle" and "the Great Mystery" (*T'ai-hsuan*). Like his predecessors he said that it deeply penetrates all things but has no visible physical form. It operates yin and yang, gives birth to motion in the universe, and originates all things. By looking up man can see the form of the heavens; by looking down he sees the condition of the earth; by looking within he will understand his nature and destiny.

However, to this Taoist metaphysic, Yang Hsiung added the

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Yang Hsiung, *Fa-yen* (Model Sayings) 3:1. *Le catechisme philosophique de Yang-Hiong-tse*, Editions de l'Occident, Brussels, 1960.

<sup>1</sup> *Fa-yen* 12:4-5.

Confucian ethic. While one should follow the principles of the world without trying to alter them, to be human means to attend to the affairs of this life, to be in society and to love universally. Man's business in life is to get hold of the Way, act like a human being and practice righteousness. To look and to love is to be human; to determine and to decide is courage. To act impartially is to control things and to use them for the sake of all men.'

*Wang Ch'ung (27-100 A.D.?)*

Another Taoist metaphysician, Wang Ch'ung, has enjoyed unusual popularity among contemporary thinkers because of his skepticism, his revolt against the authority of the past and his attacks on superstition. Actually, he should be seen primarily as a philosopher who adopted and amplified the skeptical aspect of Chuang-tzu's teachings. At a time when Confucian philosophy was often being misinterpreted to reinforce popular belief in occult phenomena, prophecies and mysterious portents, Wang Ch'ung used Taoist ideas to raise the pitch of naturalism and rationalism to a height never before reached in Chinese history.

Of particular concern to religious people is his attack on the concept of cosmic purpose. Against those who found a basic teleological factor in the universe, Wang Ch'ung insisted that all things are spontaneously produced when the material forces (ch'i) of Heaven and earth come together. We do not live in a universe designed for man. Heaven does not procure grain in order to feed man or create silk and hemp in order to clothe him. Heaven is not a farmer for the sake of man. Things are simply spontaneously created; there exist no lucky influences from Heaven. Heaven has no purpose, no mind or will, declared Wang Ch'ung, even if people would like to think so.

To those who believed that because Heaven is engaged in action its activities must resemble the purposive activities of man, Wang Ch'ung replies that Heaven merely generates and distributes material energy. It has no desire to produce things.

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◦ Classic of the Supremely Profound Principle, chap. IX; for a brief extract, see W. Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 291.

Heaven and earth are like a furnace, spontaneously giving forth heat. Heaven does not create calamities to warn us of our sins. Natural oddities and natural disasters simply represent the spontaneous products of aimless material forces." Wang Ch'ung tries to prove his point about the purposelessness of the cosmic process by contrasting the awesome majesty of Heaven with the insignificance of man. "How can our deeds activate Heaven?," he asks. Man is subject to the cosmic material force but his petty deeds cannot alter it. The wind can sway the branches of a tree but the branches cannot cause the wind."

With equal vigor Wang Ch'ung tried to demolish the common Chinese belief in life after death. In his opinion the dead do not become spirits, do not possess consciousness and cannot hurt the living." Wang Ch'ung's argument, however, fell on deaf ears, because the Confucianists remained convinced of the reality of the spirits, because the Taoists believed a way could be found to assure physical immortality, and because Buddhism arrived with a doctrine of the immortal spirit within every man. His attack on spirits is significant because it shows how philosophic Taoism could be rationalistic as well as mystical about matters which most religious people consider to be of ultimate importance.

### *The Lieh Tzu*

As we have seen, Taoism taught the equality of all things, indifference to life and death, freedom to follow one's own nature without regard for social proprieties or official morality, and the need simply to accept one's fate. Lieh-tzu was a famous Taoist of the fifth century B.C., whose writings have been lost. However, under his name, someone in the third century A.D. circulated a book which turned Taoism into a call for complete abandonment of efforts to improve society or to cultivate the self. One section of the *Lieh Tzu*, supposedly containing the

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<sup>10</sup> Lun-heng, XIII. Alfred Forke, trans., Luzac. London, 1907-11, 2 volumes.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. XLIII.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. LXII.



teaching of another ancient Taoist philosopher Yang Chu (440-360 B.C.?), expounds a purely hedonistic ethic. According to most Chinese scholars, the Taoist canonical book *Lieh Tzu* comes from an era of political and moral chaos when intellectuals despaired of society so therefore extolled private indulgence in sensuous pleasures.

In opposition to the scholars and government officials who encouraged men to try to eradicate the evils of their age, the cynical author of *Lieh Tzu* pointed out the uselessness of such endeavors. Drawing illustrations from traditional Chinese history he showed that all man's striving was of no effect. What good is there in becoming wise? Peng-tzu, the Chinese Methuselah, lived to be eight hundred without being as learned as the sage-emperors; while a virtuous disciple of Confucius died at age eighteen. Wicked king Chou stayed on his throne, but his three good viscounts were exiled, imprisoned or executed. If effort is so valuable, asked Lieh-tzu, why is a sage unrecognized and a scoundrel made powerful, why are worthy men kept from high positions and the stupid given honors, why are the good so often poor but the wicked rich?

Even fate or destiny offers no real explanation for what happens to men. Fate does not control men. The longevity or brevity of a man's life, his obscurity or prominence, his riches or poverty are inexplicable. They happen, but the reason why is beyond our capacity to fathom. For Lieh-tzu the skeptic, we are confronted by questions to which there are no answers. In a time of social collapse, nothing has any rhyme or reason. As the Taoist would say, the Tao has no name.

Yang Chu bases his devotion to selfish pleasure-seeking on a philosophy of despair. Look at man, he urges. Infancy and feeble old age account for almost half an individual's allotted lifespan. His nights are wasted in sleep and half his waking hours are spent with things which are unimportant. Pain and sickness, sorrow and suffering, the death of loved ones, worry and fear occupy half the time we are not busy with trivia. Is there not at least a moment in which we have the right to enjoy

ourselves?

What pleasure is there? According to Yang Chu, life is for beauty and abundance: "For music and sex, that is all." Even these pleasures however are prohibited by threats of punishment, checked by laws, pushed from us by our desire for fame. Thus, we lose the great happiness of the present because we cannot give free reign to our impulses for even a single moment. Whether men are worthy or stupid, honorable or despised, in death they all rot, disintegrate and disappear. Let us therefore hasten to enjoy the present; why bother about what comes after death?'<sup>3</sup>

According to Mencius, Yang Chu's philosophy could be summed up in the motto: each one for himself. This meant that nothing is more important than one's personal happiness. Yang Chu vowed that he would not sacrifice a single hair from his head even to benefit the whole world. Realizing the difficulty of rescuing society from its troubles, he and others like him took no part in political affairs.

Although the author of the *Lieh Tzu* called it "the Pure Classic of the Perfect Virtue of Simplicity and Vacuity," its readers and admirers used it to justify a life of unbridled sensuality. Young men from the upper classes created what they called the Light Conversation school of Taoism which avoided politics, ridiculed traditional morality, indulged in every form of unconventional behavior and pretended to be free."

### *Neo-Taoism*

During the last fifty years of the Han dynasty (200 B.C.-220 A.D.), China was politically divided, subjected to repeated floods and droughts, ravaged by continuous warfare, and miserably governed by corrupt officials. Disgusted by what was taking place, many scholars turned away from government service and tried to find consolation in transcendent values. Because of

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<sup>13</sup> A.C. Graham, trans., *The Book of LiehTzu*, John Murray, Ltd., London, 1960, vii.

" W. Chan, *Source Book*, pp. 315-316.

the disordered world in which they lived, they could not be satisfied with Confucian orthodoxy or the Taoist occultism of the masses. Neither the sterile scholasticism of the former nor the astrology, alchemy and divination of the latter were inspiring. All the anti-Confucian philosophers soon became fashionable, among them Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. With Confucius in disrepute, who could be more stimulating than his arch-critics?

Chinese thinkers during the Wei-Chin dynasties (220-420 A.D.) looked for some common ground on which to base their arguments. They found this in *Li* (Principle) which gradually became a central concept in Chinese philosophy. In the second place, as a result of renewed study of the Taoist classics, Wei-Chin scholars interpreted *Wu* (non-being) not as the opposite of being but rather as pure, undifferentiated and ultimate reality. Three former imperial ministers played the major roles in the formulation of Neo-Taoism: Wang Pi (226-249 A.D.), Ho Yen (?-249 A.D.) and Kuo Hsiang (?-312 A.D.). Although Wang Pi died before he was twenty-five, he wrote important commentaries on Lao-tzu and the *I Ching*, the Confucian classic most easily interpreted in Taoist terms. Whereas earlier Taoism had concerned itself with the all-embracing and immanent Tao manifested in the visible world, Wang Pi stressed the transcendent Tao, the ultimate reality, the original non-being. It is pure being, the primal yet indescribable reality. In its substance and function are one. Where Lao-tzu used the word "fate" or spoke of "destiny decreed by Heaven," Wang Pi used the term Principle (Li). When neo-Confucian philosophy made its appearance (late eighth century), its adherents borrowed from Wang Pi by emphasizing "the Principle of Nature" (T'ien-li). In an age of disunity and trouble, Wang Pi sought a unified system based on a single reality, *pen-wu*." His work became enormously influential.

Ho Yen, the second great exponent of Neo-Taoism, stressed the transcendence of non-being rather than its value as a unify-

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" W. Chan. *Source Book*. pp. 316-317, 318-324.

ing principle. Tao has no predicates or attributes so cannot be given a name. When one looks at it, it has no form; when one listens to it, it has no sound. It possesses nothing and yet strangely possesses everything. Because of Tao, no matter how far apart similar things are, they respond to each other; and no matter how near different things are, they do not violate each other. At a time when scholars were so involved in naming, classifying, arranging and regulating everything—with disastrous consequences—Ho Yen reminded his contemporaries that the ultimate and most important reality is transcendent.

Nevertheless, Wang Pi and Ho Yen combined Taoist metaphysics with Confucian ethics. For them Lao-tzu was the great sage in matters of ontology but Confucius provided a superior guide in questions of social or individual morality. Possibly it was because Wang Pi and Ho Yen recognized the individualistic anarchism which could be derived from the *Tao-Te-Ching* that they asserted the continuing validity of the Confucian family-centered ethic.

Kuo Hsiang, the third apostle of Neo-Taoism, wrote a commentary on the collected essays of Chuang-tzu. As Wang Pi went beyond Lao-tzu by introducing the concept of Principle, Kuo Hsiang dropped Chuang-tzu's term "Tao" in favor of *Tzu-jan* (Nature). Heaven is not considered something behind, above or beyond the process of Nature but is merely a synonym for Nature as a whole. Because every thing has its specific principle there is no need for an over-all original reality to combine and govern them. In contrast to Wang Pi, Kuo stresses being, the many, and the fundamental immanence of principle. Each being has its own principle therefore each is self-sufficient.

Kuo Hsiang also was a fatalist. The principles of things were correct from the outset and remain so: our nature and destiny are only what they should be. By letting nature take its course, men can be perfect. We must know our nature, accept it, trust it, express it and be satisfied with it. Allow the foot to walk according to its capacity and let the hand grasp with all its strength, he urged. Kuo claims that to be in accord with all

things necessarily implies the fullest possible exercise of one's talents and capabilities. As he put it, one roams about all over the transcendental world in order to enlarge the mundane world."

From the days of Lao-tzu and Yang Chu to the full flowering of Taoist philosophy in the writings of Wang Pi, Ho Yen and Kuo Hsiang about seven hundred years of study, scholarship and speculation took place. Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu were not like meteors which suddenly appear, briefly light up the dark skies and quickly vanish. Instead, they should be seen as initiators of an intellectual, moral and mystical period twice as long as the Protestant movement from Luther to the present. During this lengthy period there was time to examine every aspect of Taoism, see the relevance of the Tao to such diverse problems as ontology and social ethics, as well as investigate and refine the meaning of specific concepts like *Li*, *Wu* and *T'ien*.

Taoism never existed in a vacuum. From the meeting of Lao-tzu and Confucius onward, it had critics and rivals. For most of the early period the Taoists faced opposition from the Confucian scholars and government officials. By the time Neo-Taoism appeared, equally vigorous activity by Buddhist monks weakened the hold Taoism had on the Chinese.

Soon Taoism relied almost exclusively upon diviners, alchemists, faith healers and other masters of the occult to gain adherents. Since Confucian scholars preferred to concentrate on social ethics and practical statesmanship, Chinese concern for communion with the spiritual world was left to the Taoist psychics and herb doctors or the Buddhist priests. Some of the best emperors—and the worst—became devotees of the occult. After 1016 A.D. Taoists looked to "celestial masters" at the Dragon and Tiger mountain for psychic advice, charms and prognostications of the future. Philosophic Taoism became folk Taoism."

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<sup>16</sup> W. Chan, *Ibid.* p. 333.

<sup>17</sup> For material on subsequent folk Taoism, the reader should consult Holmes Welch, *Taoism, The Parting of the Way*.

## IV. TAOISM IN THE MODERN AGE

As China entered the modern age, Taoism already seemed to be fated for eventual extinction. According to Professor Wing-tsit Chan, by 1950 there was nothing in it to promise, let alone insure, its survival. Since folk religion (which is what Taoism had become) is ridiculed by the intellectuals, condemned by the Christians and suppressed by the Communists, it is easy to prophesy its early demise. What future can a religion have which is largely superstitious, lacking in capable leadership, unconcerned with educational, medical or philanthropic service, without strong organizations and primarily devoted to banishing evil spirits? Both Chinese Communists and their Nationalist opponents believe that prosperity, good health and happiness will come not by relying on spirits but through secular education, family planning, economic growth and material improvements.'

However, Taoism has always been open to new ideas and has easily taken on new forms. For several centuries the old folk religion has evolved into a variety of new religious societies like the Tsai-li Society (the Religion of Principle).<sup>2</sup> Founded during the last days of the Ming dynasty by Yang T'sun-jen, a member of the mandarin class, and his disciple Yin Yeng-sheng, this society calls itself the Principle-Abiding Sect because the members follow the Principle of the ancient sages who transmitted the doctrine of Heaven and Earth. Principle (*Li*) on the human level refers to discipline of the mind and body, rectifying the heart, returning to the Root, and reawakening the spirit. Tsai-li members abstain from smoking, using snuff and drinking intoxicating beverages. Adherents are specifically urged to be hard-working and thrifty. Besides worshipping the Buddhist goddess of mercy (Kuan-yin) and the coming Buddha Maitreya, members have altars to the two founders of their sect. The Tsai-li Society attracted large numbers of the farmers and artisans in north and west China as well as many residents of the cities in

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' W. Chan, *Religious Trends in Modern China*. Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1953, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> Also called *Li Chino* and *Li Men*, "Li" meaning Principle.

the Yellow River valley.

Related to this group is the older White Lotus Society, founded originally as a Buddhist sect, which produced a variety of Taoist offshoots. Of these, the Big Sword Society was organized during the reign of the last Manchu emperor (1875-1908). Originally it was strongly pro-government and anti-Christian. Big Sword members worship Heaven and Earth, the sun and moon, the Black Tiger who protects the human body, as well as two other guardians of mankind, the heavenly tortoise and snake.

Another White Lotus group, The Way of Following the One (Kuei-i Tao), has not been involved in politics. Founded by Li T'ing'yu about 1630, it stressed the value of devotional practices like using the rosary, reciting sacred verses and bowing four thousand times every day with the head touching the ground. Believing in avoiding the vices associated with the desire for wealth and fame, those who follow the One emphasize a self-reliant life based on hard work, practice vegetarianism and try to be kind to every living thing. Worship is given to the Mother of No-birth, the creator and preserver of all life, the one God whom Buddhists, Taoists and Confucianists recognize under different names. Combining the three traditional faiths of China, the Kuei-i Tao borrows Taoist techniques for relating to the spirit world, the Buddhist doctrine of salvation from universal suffering, and Confucian ethics. To follow the One, a person should practice eight virtues: sincerity, rectification of the heart, carefulness in speech, personal integrity, seriousness in handling business affairs, urging others to be good, respect for elders and affection for the young. To avoid harm to himself and others, one should not seek fame or wealth, desire illicit sexual gratification, be gluttonous, feel jealous or commit falsehood. In line with the strong ethical emphasis of the sect, members center their religious life in the home rather than in temples. <sup>3</sup>

After World War I, the Tao Yuan (Society of the Way) appeared, and within a single decade it had gained more than

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<sup>3</sup> W. Chan, *Mid*, pp. 161-162.

30,000 members. Based on a revelation received from a planchette or ouija board, it called upon men to worship one God—the Great Unity, the Ultimate Sage and Primeval Ancestor. At its altar, praise is paid to Confucius, Lao-tzu, Buddha, Muhammad and Christ. Among the key doctrines is the ideal of community between Heaven and man to be achieved through spiritualism. Also stressed is the need for world brotherhood. Members practice meditation, cultivate the spiritual life, believe in the use of planchettes to communicate with the spirit world and experiment with spirit photography. At the same time the Tao Yuan operated hospitals, emphasized social service, established credit bureaus for its poorer members and carried on extensive Red Cross work. In fact, the charitable side of its activities caused the Tao Yuan to be renamed the Red Swastika Society, much as the Red Cross is called the Red Crescent in Islamic nations.'

Another sect, The Way of Pervading Unity (I-kuan Tao) grew out of the remains of the once powerful Boxers (the Society of Righteous Fists). About 1928 Chang T ien-jan gave new life to the movement and its influence spread through the World War II years until his death in 1947. According to this Taoist group, the One is the root of all things, the Principle which permeates all existence. The universe evolves from the realm of Principle to the realm of material energy (*ch' i*) through the active and passive force of yang and yin. We are now in the midst of the third and final catastrophe in human history, this sect maintains, but through the mercy of the Mother of No-birth—and our own efforts—the world will be saved. In I-kuan Tao, every religion is believed to provide vehicles for salvation; and in the end, all people will be saved. Images of all religions are worshipped. Buddhist as well as Taoist sacred texts are studied, memorized and recited. Members abstain from smoking, eating meat or consuming alcoholic drinks. They communicate with the spirit world by means of the planchette, value the use of mantras and carry sacred charms. During World War II, the Way

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\* *Mid*, pp. 163-164.



of Pervading Unity was active in almost all of the country occupied by the Japanese soldiers; following the Communist takeover it, like other popular religions, was ruthlessly suppressed.

Since reeducation of the masses has been energetically carried out by the Maoist government, it is difficult to say how much of Taoism will survive on the mainland. During the Republican period there were at least 43,000,000 Taoists in the country, in spite of government crusades against "superstition," Christian missionary attacks and the ridicule of the Chinese intellectuals. <sup>5</sup> It is undoubtedly premature to predict the extinction of Taoism even in Red China; and beyond the reach of the state police are the millions of Chinese in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, southeast Asia and America who are free to be Taoist if they wish. At least some of the newer Taoist sects which emphasize the spirit world, social service, a synthesis of all religions and a high standard of personal ethics, still have a worthwhile message for the modern world.

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<sup>5</sup> W. Chan says that prior to 1950, the Taoist priests and "vegetarian women" were far fewer in number than the 600,000 Buddhist monks and nuns in China. This merely shows that as a religion for the masses, Taoism does not need or stress a priestly class. (Wing-tsit Chan, *Ibid.*, p. 141).

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