

THE TAOIST TRADITION: A HISTORICAL OUTLINE

Russell Kirkland
University of Georgia

1. THE TEXTS OF "CLASSICAL TAOISM"

The Nei-yeh (mid 4th century BCE)

A brief, anonymous text, long-overlooked in Asia and the West alike. The *Nei yeh* ("Inner Cultivation"; preserved in the *Kuan-tzu*) teaches how to internalize spiritual forces — *ch'i* ("life-energy"), *ching* ("vital essence"), and *shen* ("spiritual consciousness") — through meditative quiescence and purification. To balance and quiet his/her *hsin* ("heart/mind"), the practitioner builds up his/her *te* ("proficiency at obtaining" such energies) by practicing daily self-control over thought, emotion, and action. By doing so, one can become a "Sage" (*sheng-jen*). Such practices deeply influenced the thought and practice of some forms of "Later Taoism," especially forms of "New Taoism" like Ch'üan-chen. Also, the *Nei yeh*'s teachings about *ch'i*, *ching*, and *shen* became basic to traditional Chinese medicine.

The Chuang-tzu (late 4th century BCE, and later material)

Originally 52 chapters; cut down to 33 by Kuo Hsiang in 3rd century CE. Chapters 1-7 originated in writings of **Chuang Chou** (ca. 370-300 BCE); other chapters are by later writers who liked Chuang's ideas but had somewhat different views. The full text was completed ca. 130 BCE.

Form:

Some vague exposition, but mostly dialogical stories, many of them fanciful and surprising

Contents:

Questions the value of "rational thought" as a reliable guide to reality

Casts doubt upon constructed frameworks of meaning: "How do I know what is true?"

Suggests need for revolutionized perception of reality, without explaining how to get it

General Ideal: **Tao** — the reality of things as they are; never clearly explained

Human Ideal: The "True Person" (*chen-jen*) — a person who lives in accord with the way things are, rather than attempting to live by analysis and planning

The Tao te ching ["Lao-tzu"] (early 3rd century BCE)

Now sometimes: *Te-tao ching* (in Ma-wang-tui edition, the order of the text is different)

Origins:

- (1) ideas from anonymous people (not intellectuals) of 6th-4th centuries BCE, probably including local elders ("*lao-tzu*"), possibly including women; possible origins in the land of Ch'u;
- (2) teachings about meditative practices and ambient spiritual realities influenced by the tradition that produced the *Nei-yeh*

Transmitted orally for generations, shifting and expanding in content. Committed to writing in the early 3rd century BCE by an unknown intellectual, who converted the content to a socio-political program in response to the concerns of the intellectual elite of the political centers of his day. Eventually attributed to a character called "Lao-tzu," who was actually a pious fiction.

Contents:

1. Early Layers: Emphasis on natural simplicity, harmony, "feminine" behaviors
Ideal: **The Tao** ("Way") -- the source and natural order of things
Thesis: One should act through **Non-action** (*wu-wei*)
Education is unnecessary, and can be destructive of natural simplicity
2. Later Layers: Emphasis on sagely government; rejection of Confucian moralism
Human Ideal: **The "Sage"** (*sheng-jen*) -- one who is like the Tao
Government: If the Sage-ruler holds to the Tao, the world will be orderly.

Other "Classical Taoist" Texts: *Huai-nan-tzu* (early Han); *Lieh-tzu* (4th century CE?)

2. **"LATER TAOISM"**

A. "TRADITIONAL TAOISM" (2nd-12th centuries CE)

I. "Incipient Organized Taoism":

Movements That Produced the Traditions of Organized Taoism

1. Origins (Han dynasty: 1st-2nd centuries CE)

Roots: various social, political, and religious currents of Han times, including:

- a. prognostic and prophetic texts (*ch'an-wei*) by court advisors (*fang-shih*)
- b. imperial divinization of Lao-tzu ("Lao-chün")
- c. popular interest in "the immortals" (*hsien*) and in the Queen Mother of the West
- e. Han Confucian thought (the unity of macrocosm and microcosm)

Primary Text:

The *T'ai-p'ing ching* ["Scripture of Grand Tranquility"] (2nd century CE & later additions). A compendium of religious ideas of diverse provenance. Key teaching: Heaven is sending a "**Celestial Master**" (*t'ien-shih*) to rectify the human world. Most of the elements of later Taoism (including meditational practices, such as *ch'i*-cultivation) are found in the *T'ai-p'ing ching* to some degree.

2. The T'IEN-SHIH ("Celestial Master") Tradition (2nd century - 6th century CE)

Founder:

Chang Tao-ling, who claimed have received a Covenant from Lao-chün in 142, and claimed to be the "Celestial Master" promised in the *T'ai-p'ing ching*

Goal:

salvation from illness and inherited sins through confession and good works

Organization:

very systematic and hierarchical, down to the laity; members received graded "registers" associated with specific spiritual forces, and renounced the worship of any unapproved spirits

Opposed all other cults; regarded itself as the religious orthodoxy

Priesthood was open to women and non-Chinese; leadership was hereditary

Had no sophisticated doctrine or thought to maintain the interest of intellectuals

In 215 CE it aligned itself with the government of new Wei dynasty; remained aligned until

North China fell to invaders and rulers fled south (316 CE); lost influence thereafter

Attempted revival in North by K'ou Ch'ien-chih (early 5th cent.); little historical effect

Died out almost totally by 7th century; the later Cheng-i sect groundlessly claims to be a direct continuation of the "Celestial Master" tradition.

3. "Old Southern Taoism" (? - 4th century)

Roots:

Old (pre-4th-century) southern traditions of bio-spiritual self-development & talismanic ritual

Emphases:

(1) esoterism; (2) individual pursuit of health, longevity, and immortality

Primary Texts:

1. *San-huang wen* ["Text of the Three Sovereigns"]: methods of invoking spirits
2. *Wu-fu ching* ["Scripture of the Five Talismans"]: talismanic magic

A writing often associated with the southern tradition is the *Pao-p'u-tzu* ["(The Writings of) the Master who Embraces Simplicity"]: the writings of **Ko Hung**, a 4th-century southerner intent to demonstrate that the pursuit of immortality is a fitting goal for upstanding gentlemen (i.e., for Confucians). Ko was actually not a representative of any form of "Taoism": he repudiated the classical Taoists and had no use for the T'ien-shih Taoists. He is thus best characterized as a maverick Confucian.

4. The Great Revelations: Shang-ch'ing and Ling-pao (4th-5th centuries)

Common Characteristics:

- a. Arose in same historical setting
- b. Were based upon revelations to chosen individuals from celestial beings
- c. Venerated revealed texts
- d. Transmitted teachings secretly from master to initiate
- e. Required religious activity to effect the spiritual goal.

A. The SHANG-CH'ING Tradition

Arose in South among former followers of the "Celestial Master" tradition; flourished into T'ang times.

Revealed texts:

- (a) scriptures; (b) biographies of the "Perfected Ones"; (c) oral instructions.

Doctrine and Praxis:

The "**Perfected Ones**" (*chen-jen*) reside (1) in the heavens (one of which is called Shang-ch'ing, "Supreme Clarity"); (2) in underground grottoes; and (3) in the microcosm of the individual. The practitioner's goal is to become assimilated to the "Perfected Ones" and ascend to their heavens.

Methods of self-perfection:

(1) visualization meditation; and (2) alchemy (only for rare advanced adepts, under strict supervision)

Eschatology:

Soon the world will end, and "the Sage of the Later Age" will arrive to save those who are prepared for heavenly ascent. This "messianic" expectation gradually dissipated in later centuries.

B. The LING-PAO Tradition

Roots:

"Southern Taoism"; stimulated by the Shang-ch'ing revelations and by Mah_y_na Buddhism

Founder:

Ko Ch'ao-fu (fl. late 4th century)

Primary Text:

The (*Ling-pao*) *Tu-jen ching* ["Scripture for the Salvation of Humanity"]

Doctrine and Praxis:

A supreme deity (Yüan-shih t'ien-tsun) has existed since the beginning of the world, and constantly seeks to save humanity. He sends an emissary to reveal the *Tu-jen ching*, which is an emanation of the Tao. The adept recites the text, re-actualizing its primordial recitation by the deity and thus perpetuating its salvific efficacy. Some Ling-pao writings display clear influence of Buddhist ideas, making it the only movement in "traditional Taoism" directly stimulated by Buddhism.

II. "Organized Taoism" (5th century - 12th century)

A sense of "Taoist identity" evolved in South China during the Liu-Sung Dynasty of the 5th century. By that time, Buddhism had become a powerful force in both the North and the South (especially after the corpus of Kum_raj_va's translations stimulated interest in Mah_y_na Buddhism). In order to compete with Mah_y_na Buddhism, some members of the Taoist movements of the day began to organize their traditions into a coherent whole. They assembled a corpus of scriptures (*San-tung*, "The Three Arcana"), which included works of Ling-pao, Shang-ch'ing, and "Old Southern Taoism." Later, four supplementary sections were added, containing texts pertaining to the *Tao te ching*, the *T'ai-p'ing ching*, alchemy, and the T'ien-shih tradition. The Ling-pao master **Lu Hsiu-ching** (406-477) drew upon ritual traditions of the various earlier movements to establish new liturgical forms (*chiao* and *chai*), adding elements of both imperial ritual and popular worship. The resulting organization became known as **TAO-**

CHIAO ("the Teaching of the Tao," a term comparable to *Fo-chiao*, "the Teaching of the Buddha," and *Ju-chiao*, "the Teaching of the Confucians"). Under Ling-pao auspices, Taoism became an ecumenical, non-sectarian tradition, in which any (non-Buddhist) text or group devoted to higher spiritual goals found a place. The Ling-pao synthesis became a social and cultural bridge, blending compatible Buddhist concepts and values with more traditional Taoist forms in such a way that intellectuals, mystics, and pious peasants could all participate in a single comprehensive religious system. Eventually, the leadership of the tradition was assumed by masters ordained in the Shang-ch'ing tradition, such as **T'ao Hung-ching** (456-536). Taoists of the subsequent T'ang period traced their authority back to T'ao.

During most of the medieval period (i.e., the late "Six Dynasties," T'ang, and Northern Sung dynasties), Taoism generally maintained close ties to the government and the cultural elite. The T'ang emperors claimed descent from Lao-tzu, and continued the tradition of linking the government to Taoism for legitimacy support that had evolved in the north during the "Six Dynasties." All the T'ang emperors (esp. **Hsüan-tsung**, r. 712-755) heavily patronized Taoism. The Sung emperors Chen-tsung (r. 998- 1022) and Hui-tsung (1101-1125) favored Taoism, and commissioned collections of Taoist texts. But though imperial support for Taoist institutions was strong, the rulers generally tried to maintain control of all religious organizations.

In T'ang times, leaders like **Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen** (7th-8th century) wrote new texts on meditation and personal refinement, and associated freely with political and cultural leaders. They greatly influenced literature and politics as well as religion. Monasteries or abbeys (*kuan*), first established in 7th century, were staffed by celibate priests (*tao-shih*, some of whom were women, like Huang Ling-wei); they performed liturgical rituals (the *chiao* and *chai*) designed to integrate society and cosmos.

B. "NEW TAOISM" (10th century - present)

I. New Traditions of Individual Practice (10-13th centuries)

Chin-tan ("Golden Elixir") **Taoism**: a system of spiritual refinement through meditation, otherwise known as "**inner alchemy**." Not a sect, but rather a new approach to the Taoist life,

as expressed by such writers as Chang Po-tuan (11th century) and Li Tao-ch'un (13th century). In this tradition, older practices of physiological refinement are re-interpreted as a more abstract process of purifying the mind. Absorbed into the later Ch'üan-chen tradition.

II. New Ritual and Liturgical Traditions (10th-13th centuries)

1. **Ch'ing-wei** ("Clarified Tenuity") **Taoism:**

a complex of ritual traditions founded by a young woman ca. 900. Its "thunder rites" (*lei-fa*) allow a priest to internalize the spiritual power of thunder to facilitate meditative union with the Tao. He then heals, banishes evil influences, and blesses children.

2. **T'ien-hsin** ("Heart of Heaven") **Taoism:**

a tradition of ritual healing based upon scriptures discovered in the late 10th century; codified at the Sung court by a Taoist scholar named Yüan Miao-tsung ca. 1100. Its scriptures teach priests how to heal mental illness by drawing down spiritual power from stars. It influenced several important novels, and is still practiced among some Chinese in Thailand.

3. **Shen-hsiao** ("Divine Empyrean") **Taoism:**

a liturgical tradition established by Lin Ling-su at the court of the Sung emperor Hui-tsung (early 12th century). Lin revised the Ling-pao *Tu-jen ching* and presented Hui-tsung as a divine ruler whose reign would provide salvation to all. In modern China, Cheng-i leaders gave the Shen-hsiao title to some priests, but deemed them inferior.

4. **T'ung-ch'u** ("Youthful Incipience") **Taoism:**

An obscure tradition of therapeutic rituals founded by a young man in 1121, claiming continuity with the Shang-ch'ing tradition.

5. **CHENG-I** ("Orthodox Unity") **Taoism:**

the only Taoist liturgical tradition to survive through the 20th century. This sect, centered at Mt. Lung-hu in south China, flourished under imperial patronage from the 11th to

18th centuries. The sect was led by hereditary clerics of the Chang clan, who claimed (groundlessly) to be the descendents of Chang Tao-ling and successors to his "Celestial Master" mandate. In the 11th-13th centuries, this sect was patronized by the Sung and Yüan emperors, and in the 14th century, they were given formal jurisdiction over all Taoists in the south. To the present day, Cheng-i Taoism is found generally in South China (and among the Chinese of Taiwan, most of whom emigrated from South China). Hence, the modern Cheng-i tradition is sometimes known as "**Southern Taoism.**" As in the old T'ien-shih tradition, Cheng-i leaders from the outset sought to undermine all local cults, and they branded all other forms of Taoism (e.g., Shen-hsiao) as dangerous (i.e., as evil and/or subversive). In the mid-18th century, the Ch'ing court lost interest in them, and early Western references to Cheng-i leaders as Taoist "popes" constituted gross exaggerations. Cheng-i continue to practice, but their authority in modern times has been negligible. Cheng-i priests maintain the old *chiao* liturgies (harmonizing the local community with the cosmos), and they also serve the public with healing rituals. Unlike the other surviving form of Taoism — the less visible meditative tradition of Ch'üan-chen Taoism — Cheng-i has generally appealed to the public, wherefore Chinese rulers and modern intellectuals came to dismiss "Taoism" as nothing but the worthless superstitions of the ignorant masses. A few Westerners have been ordained as Cheng-i priests. Their writings sometimes exaggerate the importance of the liturgical Cheng-i tradition, and contribute to the misconception that Cheng-i (sometimes derided by modern observers as "popular Taoism") is all that remains of Taoism in modern times.

III. The New Movements of "the Taoist Reformation" in North China (12th-14th centuries)

Common Characteristics:

- a. Arose in different parts of North China under the conquest regimes (Chin & Yüan dynasties)
- b. Attracted followers from all levels of society
- c. Disregarded most elements of the medieval liturgical tradition
- d. Synthesized elements of Confucianism and Buddhism into Taoism

- e. Stressed dedication to moral ideals, and sometimes healing
- f. All except **Ch'üan-chen** died out by the 14th century

1. T'ai-i ("Supreme Union") Taoism:

Founded by Hsiao Pao-chen in the 12th century, it stressed ritual healing and social responsibility. Though popular among emperors (like Khubilai Khan), the sect's leaders left no writings, and their movement is therefore poorly known.

2. Chen-ta ("Perfected Greatness") or **Ta-tao** ("Great Way") Taoism:

"centered on practical morality." Founded by Liu Te-jen in the 12th century, it syncretized the basic moral teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, and was patronized by Chin government. It sought healing through prayer (rather than ritual), and stressed the classical Taoist moral values of "yielding," simplicity, humility, and respect for others. Like T'ai-i Taoism, the Chen-ta Taoists left no writings.

3. CH'ÜAN-CHEN ("Integral Perfection") Taoism:

the only "reformed" Taoist movement to survive through the 20th century. It originated in the teachings of **Wang Che** (Wang Ch'ung-yang), a 12th-century scholar. Wang taught that immortality can be attained in this life by entering seclusion, cultivating one's internal spiritual realities (*hsing*), and harmonizing them with one's external life (*ming*). His seven famous disciples included a woman (Sun Pu-erh) and a man named Ch'iu Ch'ang-ch'un, who was courted by several rulers, including the Mongol general Chinggis Khan. The tradition soon adopted a monastic setting, and its teachings became a spiritualized re-interpretation of the older Taoist practices known as Chin-tan ("Golden Elixir") or "inner alchemy." Ch'üan-chen Taoism paralleled — and interacted with — the meditative traditions of Ch'an Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism: all three stress individual moral and spiritual discipline rather than a philosophical, scriptural, or ritual focus. Ch'üan-chen Taoism endures today, both intellectually and institutionally, though it is largely unknown to Westerners, and has attracted little attention from Western scholars. Since its traditional focus was always in North China, and its headquarters today remains the **White Cloud Abbey** (Po-yün kuan) in Beijing, some contemporary Taoists refer to the modern Ch'üan-chen tradition as "**Northern Taoism.**" One

modern writer in this tradition was Liu I-ming (fl. 1800). Ch'üan-chen Taoism has been threatened in 20th-century by modernism (including Communist suppression of religion); some elements survived in Hong Kong. One branch, which has survived in China, is called **Lung-men** ("Dragon Gate") Taoism. A few Taoist masters (such as Ni Hua-ching) have recently brought related traditions to America and re-interpreted them for an American audience.

Addendum: The Sacred Books of the Taoists (*Tao-tsang*)

Size:

1120 titles in 5,305 volumes.

Contents:

All Taoist texts (and texts held in high esteem by Taoists) that were extant in 1445:

- a. the philosophical classics (and an extensive commentary literature); and
- b. scriptures, biographical texts, ritual texts, etc., of all segments of the Taoist tradition.

History:

Since T'ang times, emperors had commissioned the compilation of a definitive library of Taoist sacred works. The current edition (the *Cheng-t'ung Tao-tsang*) was completed in 1445. It was preserved in only a few monasteries (such as Beijing's White Cloud Abbey) until it was finally lithographed in 1926. Hence it was little known to either Asian or Western scholars until the 1930's. Relatively little of the material in the *Tao-tsang* has yet received serious scholarly attention, and very little has yet been translated into any Western language.

