

## **Religious Daoism**

By Yang Xusheng

From "An Overview of religious Daoism and Daoist philosophy" by Mou Zhongjian and Hu Fuchen

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Daoism truly developed when it went from being a type of shamanism to a historical movement. The relationship between shamanism and history is reflected in the Daodejing, the first complete Daoist writings, which contains new references to metaphysics in the myths and stories it contains. This confers multiple meanings on Laozi's writings, which can be interpreted on many different levels. Laozi philosophy however is clear. Zhuangzi developed and promoted ontological and existential elements of Laozi's philosophy that is considered to be a libertarian philosophy similar to philosophical anthropology and which later converged with Buddhist wisdom, or 'Prajna' under the influence of neo-Daoism and was incorporated into different branches of Mahayana Buddhism. This led to the birth of Chan, or Zen Buddhism and the golden age of Mahayana Buddhism, which had reached a state of logical perfection.

This study begins by exploring what Laozi contributed to the historical origins of religious Daoism. In terms of logic, popular belief in spirits was replaced by a new focus on existence 'in the flesh'. This approach was metaphysical, tying the question of existence to immortality. During the early period of Daoism, existence was contemplated by two juxtaposed systems of thought: Zhuangzi and Yang Zhu.

Zhuangzi viewed life through the deterioration of the human body and the impermanence of life and death. The worst thing a human can endure, said Zhuangzi, is to live a lifelong battle only to die. Death is a reference for the grandeur and uncertainty of life. For a man - a true man - to achieve immortality, Zhuangzi believed that he must be authentic. Oppositely, Yang Zhu fully rejected spiritual values, which in his view must be abandoned along with any other ultimate concerns so that we can seek guidance in our perception of things. The Yang Zhu school of thought has become the psychological basis of religious Daoist existential philosophy.

After a Daoist approach to existential philosophy emerged, it was then the turn of the tradition's

religious thinkers, who both clarified Laozi concepts and distinguished themselves from him. Some of the first Daoist philosophers believed that to be a Daoist, one had to understand and espouse Laozi's theory of immortality. For religious scholars, establishing the notion of existence as a principle in an ontological sense was of primary importance. Existential theory as seen in religious Daoism took off from there, also marking the historical shift between the 'pill of immortality' and the 'sacred embryo', or 'Sheng t'ai'.

The transition from Daoist philosophy to the existential philosophy of religious Daoism made it possible for the metaphysical basis of Daoist thought to manifest itself in material aspects of daily life. For Daoist practitioners, life was now within oneself and not in the heavens.

At first glance, religious Daoism resembles a material or even mechanical approach to existence rather than a metaphysical one; as a result, the "science of immortality" naturally focuses on any and all operation systems set in motion around the physical continuity of life. Secondly, this study examines the three great precepts of religious Daoism - Shu (magic and techniques), Ni (the encounter) and Yi (unity) - in terms of cultural and philosophical anthropology.

Shu: Daoism developed into a religion because it relied on magic and Daoist self-improvement techniques. At issue in this study is the relationship between these techniques and theory, and between the art of Daoist practice and language; the individuality of a Daoist's practice led to the gradual disappearance of the notion of ultimate concerns. This made it difficult to transform these arts into a theory, and make them a universal system of knowledge that could easily be taught and disseminated. Ascetic practice to strengthen the body is a very introspective act during which the practitioner recites enigmatic phrases that are written accounts of individual practice. From the beginning however, the transmission of these texts was discouraged and therefore difficult to obtain. The alchemists of Daoism rely on destiny to eventually gain access to this linguistic environment.

Ni: The great thinkers and alchemists of the Daoist religion sought their roots, their sources and their origins, to which they are one day destined to return. They looked for the most basic energetic form of existence. Using their own methods, they go against nature and resist it. This seemingly contradictory tradition raises the question of how one can resist the linear dissipation of vital energy.

Yi: In Laozi's and Zhuangzi's time, the highest level of unity represented the infinite path, or Dao. For religious Daoist thinkers, vital energy, or 'qi', became the highest and most universal unifying principle. It represented not only the theoretical search for communion between man and nature, but also the continued practice of this communion. Concrete answers are needed to address the question of the transformation and sublimation of vital energy; Zhuangzi philosophy must be developed further on a practical level, with a new metaphysical focus based on material practice, to understand what is essential and by extension, all things.

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