

*World
Religions*

Daoism

Third Edition

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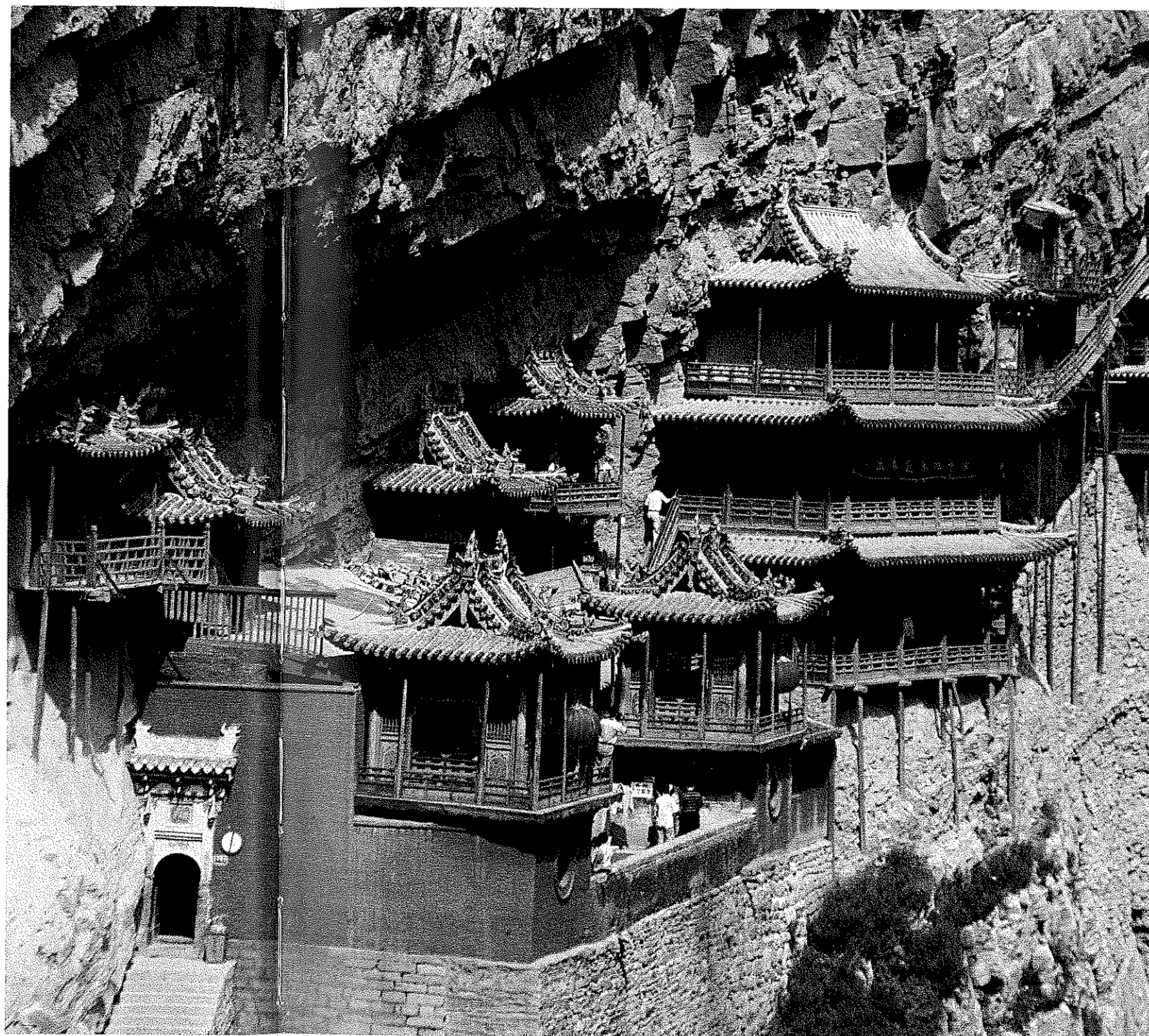
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INTRODUCTION: THE MODERN DAOIST WORLD

Daoism (pronounced DOW-ism) is one of the two great philosophical and religious traditions that originated in China. The other religion native to China is Confucianism. Both Daoism and Confucianism began at about the same time, around the sixth century B.C.E. or between 500 and 400 B.C.E. China's third great tradition, Buddhism, came to China from India around the second century C.E. Together these three faiths have shaped Chinese life and thought for nearly 2,500 years.

Wherever the Chinese people have gone they have taken Daoism with them. Thus elements of Daoism appear in many of the countries that came under Chinese influence over the centuries—countries such as Korea, Vietnam, and Japan—and in the Chinese sections of Western cities in Europe, Canada, and the United States. Daoism has also had a strong influence on Chinese literature and on the technique and subject matter of Chinese art. The People's Republic of China is officially atheist (believes that there is no deity), so it is hard to know how many of its people are Daoists but it is estimated that hundreds of millions of peo-

The Hanging Temple on northern Heng Shan, one of the five sacred mountains of Daoism. Located in Shanxi Province, the Hanging Temple was built in the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 C.E.) and has been a site of Daoist pilgrimage for many centuries.



ple practice elements of Daoism. Many people would not define themselves as being a Daoist, because they will use elements of Daoism and Buddhism at different stages of their lives. However, followers of Traditional Chinese religion—which is largely Daoist—are the majority of believers in China today. Since the Chinese government now allows people to practice religion again, many Daoist temples have been restored and reopened, and Daoism is on the rise.

DAO

To a reader of Chinese a single character can convey many shades of meaning. According to its use a character can be a noun, a verb, or an adjective. Used as a noun the word *dao* is usually translated as "path" or "way," but *dao* has other meanings also: a way of doing things, the way of the universe, or the basic way of life that Daoists follow. To Daoists the written character for *dao* symbolizes Dao as an inner way as well as an outward path.

A single Chinese character may indeed have many different meanings. However each part of that character may also have a meaning of its own. For example, the character for *dao* is a combination of two characters that represent the words "head" and "foot." The character for *foot* suggests the idea of a person's direction or path. The character for *head* suggests the idea of conscious choice. But *head* also suggests a beginning, and *foot* an ending. Thus the character for *dao* also conveys the continuing course of the universe, the circle of heaven and earth. Finally, the character for *dao* demonstrates the Daoist idea that the eternal Dao is both moving and unmoving. The "head" in the character represents the beginning—the source of all things—or Dao itself, which never moves or changes; the "foot" is the movement on the path.

道

dao

首

head

足

foot

WHAT IS DAOISM?

When used as a noun in Chinese, the word *dao* means "the way." Simply put, the way is understood to mean the way of nature. Daoists see the cycles of nature and the constant change in the natural world as earthly signs of a great and universal force. They call this unseen force Dao.

For some Dao is the Ultimate Reality, a presence that existed before the universe was formed and that continues to guide the world and everything in it. Dao is sometimes identified as the Mother, or the source of all things. However, that source is not a god or a supreme being, for unlike Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, Daoism is not monotheistic. Its followers do not worship one god; practitioners focus instead on coming into harmony with Dao. The great Daoist masters were men who taught or wrote about Dao, or who commented on the Daoist writings of others. Daoists look to the works of those masters, such as Laozi of the sixth century B.C.E. and Zhuangzi of the fourth century B.C.E., to help them find "the way."

Daoists say that the Dao that can be expressed in words is not the real or "eternal" Dao. Masters and writers can help to point the way, but each person must find his or her own Dao.

INNER HARMONY

Daoism reaches not only into the intellectual and spiritual lives of its followers, but also into their physical life. Daoists see the physical body as a kind of microcosm, or miniature model, of the universe. Natural forces create the energy of life and their interaction affects the health of the individual. Daoists ask: How can a person be in harmony with the universe if his or her body is not in harmony with itself? Thus to a Daoist the way in which someone treats his or her body is as important as what that person thinks, believes, or does in relation to others.

Learned, but Not Taught

According to the Daoist masters, Dao can be learned, but it cannot be taught.

Look, and it can't be seen. Listen, and it can't be heard. Reach, and it can't be grasped . . . You can't know it, but you can be it, at ease in your own life.

(In Stephen Mitchell, *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version.*)

A Chinese herbalist's shop in Hong Kong. Many Chinese families rely on the herbal medicines that were developed by Daoist alchemists and herbalists in the early centuries of the common era. Chinese herbal remedies are also popular in the West and are increasingly used by many non-Chinese people.



Daoists believe that a healthy body is a necessary first step to achieving a lofty spiritual state. Thus Daoism has long been associated with certain medicinal and nutritional practices. Many of the ideas and practices that Westerners think of as Chinese or Asian are in fact Daoist. For example acupressure and acupuncture, Eastern medical arts that in the past few years have been the subject of study in Western medicine, were developed by Daoist masters and have been in use for centuries.

DIET AND EXERCISE

Daoist masters have recorded the medicinal uses of thousands of plants—trees, herbs, flowers, fruits, and fungi—and have studied nutrition. The masters recommend a prudent, balanced diet to maintain health and to promote longevity. Daoist recommendations on diet are quite different, however, from the dietary laws of religions such as Judaism and Hinduism, which ask their followers to abstain from certain foods as part of their religious observance. Daoists forbid nothing, recommending only that substances harmful to the body, such as an excess of alcohol, be avoided and that everything else be eaten and drunk in a balanced, sensible, healthful way. To the Daoist, for example, broccoli is a good food but a diet that consists only of broccoli is not good because it is not balanced, and balance is the Daoist way.

In addition to a healthful diet, exercise is an integral part of Daoist practice. According to legend an early Daoist master named Zhang Sanfeng watched the movements of birds and animals and sought to copy them as a way of getting closer to the natural state. He became known as the founder of Taijiquan (*tai chi chuan*), the ancient form of Chinese exercise. Taiji exercises are used to control *qi* (*chi*), or “breath,” an essential element of human existence, which for Daoists is the center of spiritual, emotional, and physical health. The stretching, bending, and flexing exercises embody the natural *qi* of the animals and dispel the physical tensions that keep people from finding inner peace and being in touch with Dao.

EXISTING AS NATURE DOES

Meditation is often associated with Buddhism and other faiths from India; but long before Buddhism came to China Daoists were using a form of meditation to help them come into harmony with the ultimate reality of the universe. The concept of *wuwei*, or “nondoing,” is central to Daoist meditation. It is the practice of quietism—of letting go of all worldly thought and action so that Dao may enter. The phrase *wei wuwei* literally means “to do without doing,” or “to act without action,” but this literal translation

Pinyin

In the past Chinese words were phoneticized by a system called Wade-Giles; in this system the capital of China was spelled "Peking." In 1979 the Chinese government formally adopted a new system, called *pinyin*, that matches the pronunciation of Chinese words more accurately than the older Wade-Giles system. This system has gained international acceptance and gives the spelling "Beijing" for the capital of China.

does not express the complete meaning. The concept of *wuwei* more closely suggests a way of existing without conscious effort, as nature does.

ACHIEVING IMMORTALITY

Daoists believe that time spent in meditation prolongs life. In Daoist belief longevity is important, because the longer one lives the greater one's chances are of achieving perfect harmony with Dao. The perfect person might hope to become immortal and rise to heaven—not just in spirit but physically as well. A number of legendary and historical people are believed to have

reached this immortal state called *xian*. Worshippers ask these immortals of Daoism to help them, much as some Christians ask saints for help.

The immortals of Daoism include emperors, Daoist masters, heroes of battle, and ordinary people who have attained this exalted condition through suffering, heroic deeds, or service to others. Daoists continue to strive toward *xian*, oneness with the universe, perfecting their bodies as well as their minds.

THREE TEACHINGS INTO ONE

Over the centuries the threads of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism have become intertwined, each absorbing aspects of the others. As the Chinese say, "The three teachings flow into one." This blending of traditions is consistent with the Asian approach to religion, which allows for believing in more than one truth. Thus many people who consider themselves Chinese Buddhists or Confucianists, as well as many agnostics—people who claim that no one can know whether a god exists but who do not deny the possibility of that existence—also practice aspects of Daoism. Such practice is possible because the traditions do not conflict. Rather they complement one another.

YIN AND YANG

In all, Daoists seek balance and harmony in their lives. In Chinese thought yin, "the shady side of the hill," cannot exist without yang, "the sunny side." To have one it is necessary to have the other. Yin is passive; yang is

active. Yin is cool; yang is warm. Yin is night; yang is day. Yin is female; yang is male. Daoism celebrates yin, the femaleness of the universe, in which quiet and "letting be" are more fruitful than strife and direct action.



Daoist priests reading from sacred texts as they perform the daily temple ritual in a Chinese temple.