

Daoism is an indigenous traditional religion of China. It is generally believed that Daoist organizations were formally established 1,900 years ago by *Celestial Master Zhang Daoling* during the reign (AD 126-144) of *Emperor Shundi* of the Eastern *Han* Dynasty. However, the original sources of Daoist doctrines can be traced back to the Pre-*Qin* period (4000-221 BC). Thus there is the common reference to the “Three Ancestors” that alludes to the *Yellow Emperor*, *Lao Zi* and *Celestial Master Zhang*.

The ideological system of Daoism covers a wide range of contents. Generally speaking, it evolved into a religious culture by basing itself on ancient religious beliefs in China around the worship of heaven and ancestors, as well as Daoist theories and beliefs regarding immortality arising during the *Spring* and *Autumn* Period and the *Warring States* Period. It has also absorbed ethical ideas from Confucianism and folk religious customs.

The core of Daoism is, of course, *Dao* (the Way), which is beyond description. It is said that *Dao* is the origin of the universe, the basis of all existing things, the law governing their development and change, and the ultimate god of Daoism. The concept of Virtue (*De*) is closely related to *Dao*. *Dao De Jing* relates, “All respect *Dao* yet value Virtue.” Virtue has different connotations.

Daoists regard *Dao* and Virtue as the general principles of their beliefs and behavior. They should not only cultivate *Dao* but also accumulate Virtue. Therefore, both *Dao* and Virtue serve as the basis of Daoist doctrines. Derived from the foundation of *Dao* and Virtue are a whole set of principles, including non-action, non-passion and non-desire, non-struggle, and the pursuit of simplicity and truth.

Daoists believe in both *Dao* as well as in deities and immortals. “Gods” in Daoism refer to the *Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning*, the *Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure* and the *Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Virtue*, the *Jade Emperor* and the *Great Emperor of Zhenwu*, who were born before heaven and earth separated; while “immortals” refer to humans who were born after heaven and earth separated and transformed into deities, becoming immortals through cultivating *Dao*.

From the Daoist perspective, both gods and immortals are symbols of *Dao*. There exists a hierarchy of gods and immortals in Daoism. At the top of the hierarchy are the gods of the highest ranks the *Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning*, the *Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure* and the *Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Virtue*, who are the embodiment of *Dao* or may be said to be the *Dao* itself. Below them are the gods of the lower ranks, who are entrusted with responsibilities according to their attainments in *Dao* and Virtue. The highest among them is the *Jade Emperor*, followed by the four major deities and other celestial beings. The *Jade Emperor* is the highest ruler of the universe. Different deities and immortals have different responsibilities. Among the most popularly known are the celestial beings in charge of wind, rain, thunder, lightning, water and fire, the *God of Wealth*, the *Kitchen God*, the *God of the Town* and the *God of the Land*.

Daoism believes that the universe contains 36 heavens above and 36 hells below. The highest heaven is called *Da-luo Heaven*. The next three heavens are the *Realm of Absolute Purity*; the four heavens after that are the *Four Brahmas*; while the rest of the 28 heavens include the *Immaterial Realm* (four heavens), the *Material Realm* (18 heavens), and the *Realm of Desire* (six

heavens).

*Da-luo Heaven* is wherein dwells the *Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning*, the *Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure* and the *Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Virtue*; the *Realm of Absolute Purity* is the abode of nine grades of saints, realized beings and immortals. Those in the *Four Brahmas* are free of the pain of life and death; those in the *Immaterial Realm* enjoy longevity but are not free from the pain of life and death; while the people in the *Realm of Desire* experience all manner of desire as well as pain.

The 36 hells are the netherworld where the souls of the deceased dwell. Daoism believes that the deceased will be judged by the *Ten Kings* of the netherworld. A benevolent person will be reincarnated, while an evil-doer will be subject to punishment in these hells.

Daoism also believes that, among the famous mountains of the earth, there are 10 Big Daoist Caves, 36 Small Daoist Caves and 72 Promised Lands, which serve as the abodes of immortals. Among the four seas, there are 10 continents and three islands, where immortals take rest and the divine grass grows. It is believed that if one eats this grass, one will become immortal.

The highest ideal of a Daoist is to acquire immortality. To achieve this goal, one must practice Daoism both inside and outside one's physical existence. Inner practice involves physical and breathing exercises, concentrated contemplation, and the taking of elixirs. Later, this type of practice gradually came down to refining the interior elixirs (*neidan*). The basic principle of this practice is still to cultivate the self both spiritually and physically. External practice involves doing good deeds and helping others so as to acquire more merit and virtue. If one succeeds in both aspects, one could enter the world of immortals.

The books that record Daoist doctrines are referred to as the Daoist scriptures. There were different kinds of Daoist scriptures compiled at different moments in history, all under the title of the Daoist Canon.

The earliest Daoist Canon appeared during the *Tang* Dynasty, followed by other editions compiled during the *Song*, *Jin*, *Yuan* and *Ming* dynasties. Extant today are two editions respectively compiled during the reign of *Zhengtong* and the reign of *Wanli* of the *Ming* Dynasty, hence the names: *Zhengtong Daoist Canon* and *Wanli Supplementary Daoist Canon*. The decree from a *Yuan*-dynasty emperor to burn Daoist Canon resulted in the loss of a great number of Daoist doctrines. Today, the Daoist Association of China is making efforts to recompile an anthology of Daoist doctrines, entitled *China's Daoist Canon*.

The *Dao De Jing* by *Lao Zi* is Daoism's principal and most important canon. Other canons include *Book of Secret Revelations*, *Book of Purity and Quietness*, *Book of the Lower Elixir Field*, *Book of Divine Deliverance*, and *Can Tong Qi*.

Many schools of Daoism were formed throughout history. During the *Han* Dynasty, there arose *Tianshi* Daoism and *Taiping* Daoism; during the *Wei* and *Jin* Period, there were the *Shangqing* Sect, the *Lingbao* Sect, and the *Sanhuang* Sect; the *Song*, *Jin* and *Yuan* dynasties saw *Quanzhen* Daoism, *Taiyi* Daoism, *Zhenda* Daoism, and *Jinming* Daoism. Historical fusion brought many different sects together, from which two important sects, the *Zhengyi* Sect (evolved from *Tianshi* Daoism) and *Quanzhen* Daoism (founded by *Wang Chongyang*), finally developed. Today's Daoist followers belong to either of these two sects. The *Zhengyi* Sect is popular mainly in *Jiangxi*, *Jiangsu*, *Shanghai* and *Fujian* provinces, while *Quanzhen* Daoism flourishes in other parts of China. There is no difference in basic beliefs between the two sects, with the only differences lying in their norms and regulations. *Quanzhen* Daoism, for example, requires its followers to be

vegetarians, remain single and live in temples, while the *Zhengyi* Sect has no such regulations at all.

Sites for Daoist activities are called Daoist Palaces (*gong*) or temples (*guan*). Daoists in the early days preferred to build their temples in wild but serene mountains and forests. With the spread of Daoism, more and more temples were built in urban areas. Each of them came to enshrine a great number of statues of deities and immortals. Daoists lived in the temples, practicing *Dao* and conducting sacred rites. Ordinary believers frequented these places to burn joss sticks and worship the gods. These temples were open to visitors, too. On the birthdays of the main gods and immortals, grand services were held in the temples, attracting a steady flow of people who came to offer incense sticks and to pray for blessings. Some temples also sponsored fairs, which brought together the worship of gods with recreational and trading activities, to produce lively festivities.

Daoism, during its time-honored history of development, has exerted far-reaching influences on China's philosophy, literature, arts, medicine and science. What merits special attention is its great contribution to ancient Chinese medicine and chemistry. A folk saying goes, "Nine out of 10 Daoists are doctors." Daoists' pursuit of longevity and health resulted in many Daoists excelling in medicine. Some renowned senior Daoists, like *Ge Hong* of the *Jin* Dynasty, *Dao Hongjing* of the Southern and Northern Dynasties and *Sun Simiao* of the *Tang* Dynasty, were all well-known doctors and pharmacists. Daoists of early times attached great importance to minerals, mainly lead, mercury, sulfur, gold, and silver, from which they believed elixirs could be made. They had hoped that these elixirs could free them from the terrors of death. During this process they discovered certain chemical phenomena, which they recorded. Their records thus became the most valuable documents in ancient Chinese chemistry. Joseph Needham, historian of science, wrote in his *Science and Civilization in China*: "Many of the most attractive elements of the Chinese character derive from Daoism. China without Daoism would be a tree of which some of its deepest roots had perished." What is worth mentioning here is that gunpowder, one of China's four great inventions, was actually invented by Daoists during their attempts to create elixirs.

Daoist culture has long permeated the everyday life of ordinary Chinese people since it exerted great influences on social customs in ancient China and on the shaping of national consciousness. The venerated *Lu Xun*, the great Chinese writer, once said, "China is rooted in Daoism." Daoism has played an important role in the making of traditional Chinese culture. To know it is to possess a key to a better understanding of traditional Chinese culture.

Today, as one of the five major religions (Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism) in China, Daoism has a great number of followers. There are more than 1,600 temples and more than 25,000 Daoist priests of the *Quanzhen* Daoism and the *Zhengyi* Sect. The number of ordinary believers is almost impossible to assess.

Daoism has also found its way to other parts of the world. Daoist methods of keeping fit and healthy, as well as the Daoist concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, have claimed a great deal of attention. Daoism is attracting the interest of an increasing number of people worldwide.

The emblem of Daoism is the *Taiji* symbol, or diagram of the cosmological scheme, comprised of a circle with an S-shaped line dividing the white (*yang*) and black (*yin*) halves.