

# Chapter 1

## An Introduction to Taoism

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Getting oriented to Taoism
  - ▶ Tracing Taoist history
  - ▶ Considering Taoist ideas
  - ▶ Examining Taoist practice
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**N**ot much more than a half-century ago, many Americans had their main exposure to Chinese people and things Chinese from an exotic meal at the local Chinese restaurant, a touristy adventure in a big-city Chinatown, or even a Charlie Chan movie. Today, things have certainly changed, and the Chinese presence in America (and in the world) has come a long way from pu-pu platters, isolated ethnic enclaves, and cinematic sages speaking fortune-cookie dialogue in broken English. Today nearly 4 million Chinese people (or people of at least partial Chinese descent) live in the United States, and Chinese people may make up close to 5 percent of the Canadian population. What's more, Chinese people now participate in pretty much every aspect of modern American culture — their contributions to schools, neighborhoods, businesses, and local communities are as important and as visible as those of any other American. And, by the way, you just may have heard somewhere that China is now an important global economic and political power, too!

So, what could possibly be a better time for picking up a few pointers on Taoism, one of China's oldest (and most interesting) indigenous religious traditions? If you're not Chinese, learning about Taoism could help you gain some insight into Chinese religious, philosophical, and cultural sensibilities. If you are Chinese, it's a chance to get to know your own background and history a little better. But the funny thing is that even though Taoism has informed much of Chinese identity, it isn't the easiest thing to find. Very few Chinese people in America identify themselves specifically as Taoists, and most communities don't have Taoist temples. And when you do find a Taoist temple or teaching center, you may find that the staff and students consist entirely of non-Chinese people. In other words, despite the unprecedented integration of Chinese in the West, and even with the deluge of "Tao of" readers on bookstore shelves, Taoism is still pretty much a mystery to many people.

## Taoism or Daoism?

Maybe you already know that the first syllable of Taoism is pronounced *dow* (as in the Dow Jones Industrial Average), or that some books spell it *Daoism* rather than *Taoism*. Maybe you've noticed that the capital of China used to be called "Peking" but today is called "Beijing" (even though you still order Peking duck at Chinese restaurants). And textbooks used to call the longtime leader of China "Mao Tse-tung," but today they call him "Mao Zedong." What's going on here?

Part of it is the difference in regional dialects, but the bigger issue is that the sources that regularly deal with things Chinese — texts, newspapers, websites — use two different Romanization systems, which are sometimes in a kind of competition with each other. The Wade–Giles system, which spells *Tao* with a *T*, took hold in the early 1900s and dominated almost all publications for most of the 20th century. However, the Chinese were never nuts about the system and eventually developed *Hanyu Pinyin*, the system with the *D*, in the late 1950s. This one started to pick up international recognition by the early 1980s, though Taiwan initially resisted it, and many areas with large Chinese populations — like American Chinatowns — have been slow to adopt it. In some circles, choosing one system over another could be perceived as making a political statement, but none of that is figuring into the choice for this book. We've gone with *Taoism* for this book because the publisher judged that more readers would recognize *Taoism* than *Daoism*. So, this book uses the older Wade–Giles system, except when referring to place names (like Beijing or Xi'an) where a different spelling will probably be more familiar to most readers.

So, why does the Wade–Giles system spell things with a *T* even though they're pronounced like a *D*? Is this some bizarre code that only nerdy polyglots can understand? There are actually a few reasons:

- ✓ **There's no Chinese alphabet.** Each character has a specific pronunciation (including a particular tone) that you can only know if

someone else (like your parents) teaches it to you; you can't just read the letters and know the exact pronunciation.

- ✓ **There are lots of sounds in Chinese that don't have exact parallels in English.** Every time you read a Romanized Chinese word or name, it's really just an approximation of that word.
- ✓ **Although there is no Chinese alphabet, many characters do have certain phonetic characteristics — calligraphic hints as to how they could be pronounced — and usually, words that are etymologically related sound similar.** For example, some characters that are pronounced *tao* (with a *t* sound) are related and look similar to some that are pronounced *dao* (with a *d* sound). So, the creators of the Wade–Giles system asked a question that would only matter to specialists: How on Earth can we put all the *taos* and all the *daos* close to each other in Chinese-English dictionaries that are arranged alphabetically?

Their solution was ingenious . . . or kind of crazy, depending on how you look at it. Try the following exercise: Hold the open palm of your hand right in front of your face — up close to your lips, but not touching them — and say the English word *tie*. Do you notice that you get a breath of air blowing against your palm? Now say the word *die*. Do you notice that your lips, teeth, and tongue seem to be doing the exact same thing as when you said *tie*, but without the breath of air on your palm? That's because *tie* and *die* are essentially the same words, but one is *aspirated* (that is, breathed with a burst of air), and the other is not. And so, the Wade–Giles architects decided that *t'ao* (with the apostrophe) would be read as written, with the aspirated *t* sound, while *tao* (without the apostrophe) would be read with the unaspirated *d* sound. And — *voilà!* — *tao* is pronounced like *dow!* And that's why *pao* is pronounced like *bow* and *kao* is pronounced like *cow*. You can check out Appendix C for a complete pronunciation guide to the Wade–Giles system used in this book.

## Getting the Lay of the Taoist Land

As you get oriented to Taoism, you quickly find out that there seem to be lots of different kinds of Taoism and Taoists, and that it's often hard to figure out how any one of these "Taoisms" relates to any other. Part of this is that the Chinese aren't always consistent in how they use the terms, and they may even apply them to people and practices that technically aren't really Taoist. It's especially common for people to call various nondenominational family or community customs "popular Taoism" or "folk Taoism," just because they're clearly not Buddhist and no one's quite sure what category to put them in. Certainly, a big part of navigating Taoism is the process of sorting one strain from another.

Along these same lines, Taoism (like every other one of the world's major traditions) changes over time, and not always in a linear fashion that you can chronicle with a nice, neat, century-by-century timeline. If you try to imagine a Taoist family tree, you need to be prepared for lots of gnarled branches, limbs that snap suddenly and then somehow seem to regrow again in some other location, roots that entangle with those of other trees and then become indistinguishable from each other, and oddly shaped fruits that look and taste completely different from other fruits growing on different vines on the very same tree. It is, to put it mildly, a tangled family tree.

The first step to keeping all the Taoisms straight in your mind is to develop a certain working vocabulary for classifying Taoism. This often involves examining the categories you hear most often online and in textbooks — like "philosophical Taoism" and "religious Taoism" — and then moving on to more careful and more nuanced language and divisions. You can find a discussion about all this in Chapter 2.

But nothing makes Taoism harder to understand than approaching the subject with misconceptions — either about Chinese religion in general or about Taoism in particular — and then finding that the stuff you read doesn't make any sense. If you heard somewhere that Taoism is atheistic or agnostic, you'll certainly get confused when you start finding huge collections of deities enshrined at Taoist temples. If you've found inspiration in the *Tao Te Ching*, one of the most frequently translated books in human history, you'll probably be disappointed to learn that it often doesn't have much to do with actual Taoist practice. If you have the idea that Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu taught a spiritual path, it'll no doubt shake you up a bit to discover that the whole concept of *spirituality* is actually a Western (and recent) invention. The good news, of course, is that once you understand the odd confluence of events, the intellectual chain reactions that cemented most of these misconceptions in the Western imagination, you'll get not only new eyes for "real" Chinese Taoism, but also a new perspective on the shape and flavor of the Taoism that's catching on in the West.

Tossing out these types of misconceptions about Taoism opens things up for you to see Taoism on its own terms, and to situate it in its broader context as one ingredient of Chinese religion and culture. Fortunately, Chinese religion is not some alien or wholly other prospect — we’re not dealing with Martians or anything like that here — but it does contain some unexpected surprises. For the most part, the Chinese religious worldview is very pragmatic in its concerns; the Chinese have historically given much more attention to matters of day-to-day living than abstract speculation about the nature of God or the human soul. This involves a strong emphasis on family and regional identity, where family relationships serve as a model for most ethical norms. Chinese religious practitioners ordinarily engage a range of gods and other spirits — irrespective of whether they originate in one tradition or another — who have various specialties, functions, and most important, the ability to influence human affairs. And a number of religious “experts” — priests, diviners, exorcists, and so on — help mediate the interactions between humans and spirits, and officiate at various public and private events. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 3.

## *Delving into the Evolution of Taoism*

If you have an idea that history is a lot of dull stuff — names, dates, facts, and figures — you’re not alone. And trying to memorize a collage of uncoordinated details can be about as snooze-worthy as it gets. Fortunately, you’ll find it hard to nap through the story of Taoism. Colorful characters, dramatic innovations, and unexpected augmentations to the tradition show up at just about every turn! And the more you can fill in the historical background, the more things start to make sense.

### *Taoist origins and development*

The assorted texts, practices, and cultural traditions that we call Taoism had their earliest rumblings close to 2,500 years ago, even though it took several hundred years before any people thought of themselves as Taoists or developed any sense of shared Taoist identity. The tradition more or less began during a period of tremendous intellectual ferment in China, an extended time when numerous philosophical schools contended with one another for intellectual supremacy and political power. The Taoist texts from this period, including Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu*, still rank among the most stimulating and entertaining works in all of Chinese literature. These authors failed to “win” the debates from the Hundred Schools Period (as it is now known), in the sense that they never convinced the political leaders of the time to adopt their teachings, but they did briefly influence the ruling ideology of the early Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) in a short-lived movement called Huang-Lao Taoism, and leave a permanent mark on later Chinese religion and culture (see Chapter 4).

The first documented record of anything we can call a Taoist community or institution took shape a few hundred years after that, and it represents the first sharp right-angle turn in Taoism's history. This all began with the emergence of a charismatic teacher and healer named Chang Tao-ling, who founded a tightly knit society called, alternatively, the Way of the Celestial Masters, the Five Pecks or Rice Sect, or somewhat later, the Way of Orthodox Unity. This group

- ✔ Worshiped Lao Tzu as a divine figure (along with many other deities)
- ✔ Publicly recited the *Tao Te Ching*
- ✔ Believed in the coming of a “new age”
- ✔ Developed both a hierarchical priesthood and series of secretive rituals that continue to shape Taoism today

The community didn't last, but its forms and surviving members mixed and mingled with other people in different regions, and over the next several hundred years the tradition eventually accumulated many new sacred texts (like the Highest Purity and Numinous Treasure revelations), practices (like alchemy), and deities (like the Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning). By the 12th and 13th centuries, many new Taoist sects — like the Correct Method of the Celestial Heart, and the Perfect Great Way — were in competition with one another. I discuss these developments in Chapter 5.

## *Tao now (brown cow)*

Taoism in China suffered terribly during large swaths of the 20th century, to the point that Mao Tse-tung and his ill-conceived Cultural Revolution nearly wiped it out altogether by the mid-1970s. But since then, Taoism has mounted a vigorous comeback, including the restoration of many temples, the resumption of priestly ordination, and the performance of public ceremonies. Although a wide range of people claim various Taoist affiliations — some more legitimately than others — most Chinese Taoism today falls into two distinct denominations or lineages:

- ✔ **The Way of Orthodox Unity:** The liturgical and ritualistic branch that is more common in southern China and Taiwan
- ✔ **The Way of Complete Perfection:** The monastic branch that is more common in northern China

Although these divisions pretty much define Taoism in modern China, the vast majority of Westerners — even those who've read the *Tao Te Ching* for years and fancy themselves enthusiasts of Taoist philosophy — have never heard of either sect. I discuss these sects and compare them with each other in Chapter 6.

Speaking of the West, the history of Taoism isn't limited to China — it has begun to sprout legs and start walking around North American countries as well. The face of American Taoism is very different from that of China, which leads (some) people to debate whether it even “counts” as Taoism. For many years, Taoism's main presence in the West was through texts, including the many (if not always accurate) translations of the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* and creative popular writings like Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh*, though Taoist temples, study centers, and online marketplaces have begun popping up over the last few decades. For the most part, these American venues focus on historically marginal Taoist practices like *t'ai-chi* and *ch'i-kung*, and have found some unanticipated alliances with many of those involved in the New Age Movement. American Taoism often includes other Chinese resources, like meditation, acupuncture, traditional herbal medicine, and even sexual techniques. You can find out about the Western *Tao* in Chapter 7.

## Considering Taoist Ideas

Taoists do think about a lot of interesting things, and many Taoist texts contain some of the most philosophically rich thinking you'll find in any tradition. For the most part, Taoist ideas don't involve litanies of doctrinal formulations that people have to say they believe in order to be good Taoists, as much as observations and interpretations of the world that translate into specific ways that people should act, whether out of their own enlightened self-interest or out of interpersonal obligation. And just as Taoism changes over time and produces contending lineages, the ideas also change over time and vary in accord with the different lineages. You'll always be better off if you make peace with Taoism's internal diversity instead of trying to get everything to fit together into one “essence.”

### *It all begins with the Tao*

You probably already have an idea that Taoism has to do with the *Tao*, just as Christianity has to do with Christ and Buddhism has to do with the Buddha. But Taoism isn't really about a belief in the *Tao* or anything like that. That's because the term *Tao* simply means “the Way,” and it was already part of the Chinese worldview well before Taoism came into existence. What's more, other non-Taoist Chinese traditions lay equal claim to ownership of the term, because almost all expressions of Chinese religion and philosophy in one manner or another have something to do with figuring out the “ways” of the universe (possibly including deities) and what “ways” human beings should follow. And Chinese frequently think of various other “ways” that don't have much to do with religion or philosophy either. In other words, the term *Tao* extends well beyond Taoism, well beyond Chinese religion.

But *Tao* is an especially loaded term in the Taoist context, and discussions of it in the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* waste no time letting you know something funny's going on. First, they tell us that conventional language isn't sufficient for describing it, that those who claim to understand it couldn't possibly have it right, and that dim-witted people who hear about it won't be able to do much more than laugh. And then, they illustrate it through colorful, often paradoxical, figures of speech, and continually remind us how difficult it is to comprehend its mystery. It's as though the authors are in on some secret joke, and they keep redirecting you someplace else every time they think you're getting too close to the punchline. If you're not in a hurry, you may end up hitting your head against the *Tao* for a *very* long time.

Even with all the paradoxes and apparent narrative dead ends, some fairly clear characteristics of the Taoist concept of the *Tao* do come through in the texts:

- ✔ It represents a creative principle, and the authors frequently allude to it through the metaphor of a procreative mother and other feminine imagery.
- ✔ It somehow owes its creative power to being empty, which explains why so much Taoist philosophy deals with discussions of “non-being” or the relationship between “being” and “non-being.”
- ✔ Whatever the *Tao* may be, human beings habitually lose sight of it and need to recover it through a process of *returning* (a process that many people are convinced involves some type of mysticism).

You can get your *Tao* on in Chapter 8.

The Taoist process of following the Way can't really be reduced to one or two things; it's no exaggeration to suggest that every aspect of the Taoist tradition in some measure addresses following the Way, whether it involves praying to deities or engaging in the smelting of metals in a laboratory. But in the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* especially, the concept of *Tao* attaches very closely to a truly mind-boggling principle for moral action: that of *wu-wei*, which people alternately translate as “non-doing,” “doing nothing,” “actionless action,” and dozens of similar phrases. The basic idea here is that although the creative power of the *Tao* lies in its emptiness, humans can only “plug in” to the *Tao* by taking on that very quality of emptiness. This translates into acting in a way that comes not from personal desire or affect, but by emulating the empty, impartial qualities of the *Tao* itself, so you don't even feel like you're the agent of your own action. And to boot, this non-doing is utterly effective — so both the *Tao* and the person who correctly follows the *Tao* “do nothing, yet nothing remains undone.”

The discussions of non-doing introduce a roster of memorable metaphors for accomplishing such a state. The “uncarved block” refers to an object that exists in a natural state of simplicity and perfection, not yet structured (and limited) by human intervention. Bending along the “hinge of the Way” refers to the ability to adapt flexibly and fluidly to the constantly shifting circumstances of existence. And the “mind as a mirror” (which also gets a lot of mileage in

Zen Buddhism) alludes to reflecting and responding to reality as it is, without superimposing any of your own interpretations or motivations onto it. I discuss all this in Chapter 9.

## *The expansion of the Tao*

Although the concept of the *Tao* and the principle of non-doing are profound, provocative innovations, it would be hard to imagine enduring religious communities based entirely on those ideals. First-time readers of the *Tao Te Ching* may be disappointed to learn not only that *wu-wei* in isolation isn't really viable as universal public morality, but also that the text never really functioned as a Taoist "Bible," providing a social blueprint for how people should live their day-to-day lives. To understand Taoism in Chinese culture over the last 2,000 years, you need to look at different ideas and resources.

One development that fits somewhat congenially with the original ideas of *Tao* and non-doing is the integration of *yin-yang* and "five phases" (or "five elements") theory into almost all forms of Taoism. By explaining the function of the *Tao* in terms of interactions of *yin* and *yang*, or more complexly as the cycles of five active "agents" — wood, fire, earth, metal, and water — Taoists eventually came to understand everything from imperial history to medical science through elaborate systems of correspondence and resonance. In Chapter 10, I talk about the nuances of *yin-yang* theory and how that creates the basis for many Taoist practices, including various forms of physical self-cultivation.

The first actual Taoist community believed in a coming "new age" (see Chapter 11), and although the new millennium may never have actually come, Taoists over the next several centuries wrote (or received revelations through) hundreds of new texts. This may come as a surprise if you think the only significant Taoist texts are the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Chuang Tzu*, and *The Tao of Pooh*. In fact, there are nearly 1,500 volumes in the Taoist Canon, the comprehensive collection of books used by various Taoists from different time periods, most of which have never seen the light of day in English translation. The vast majority of these texts don't discuss philosophical matters like the *Tao* — in fact, most of them don't actually *discuss* anything. Instead, they include guides to performing rituals, formulas meant to be recited or chanted, aids to meditation, alchemical manuals, and documents covering a variety of disciplines (like numerology, geography, and medicine). You can find out about the history, contents, and ways of accessing the Canon in Chapter 12.

## *Looking at the Practice of Taoism*

You're probably getting the idea that if there are well over a thousand texts dealing with Taoist practice that most Westerners don't know, it stands to reason that most Westerners don't know much about Taoist practice! In fact,

many people are mistakenly convinced that Taoists have no practices (and no doctrines, no deities, and no clergy, for that matter) of any kind, apart from the vague goal of non-doing. In fact, there's probably no greater "undiscovered country" in Taoism, no territory where scholars are still learning more every day, than the world of Taoist practice. And not coincidentally, there's probably no aspect of Taoism that can be any more difficult to understand.

## *Methods of personal cultivation*

It's hard to tell exactly when something we can categorically recognize as Taoist practice first began, but regardless, it's still pretty clear that many of the earliest Taoist practices took the form of applying techniques of physical and spiritual self-cultivation. Some of these techniques resembled meditation, in that they involved a prescribed posture, emphasis on the development of mental discipline, and sometimes even the familiar Buddhist focus on your own breath. Two practices in particular, both described briefly in the *Chuang Tzu*, involve the systematic de-conditioning of all your cognitive and intellectual machinery, the undoing of destructive mental habits in order to return to the original *Tao*. One of these, "sitting and forgetting," is just what it sounds like: gradually peeling away what you already know through an introspective quiet sitting. A related practice, the "fasting of the mind and heart," involves "starving" your ordinary forms of perception until you can develop an entirely different type of immediately, intuitive perception. I talk about these practices in Chapter 13.

Many of the techniques of Taoist self-cultivation involve training of the physical body, and some of these have goals ranging from basic physical health and longevity to attaining an "immortal" status after death. Taoists haven't always spoken with one voice on matters of life and death, and they almost certainly imported their first immortality practices (and generous amounts of related folklore) from a number of non-Taoist sources, which you can read about in Chapter 14.

Over time, the most important immortality practices had to do with variations on *alchemy* (the concocting and combining of various substances in the laboratory), which adepts believed they could use to cure illnesses, gain the protection of spirits, and, of course, transform their own postmortem status. There have been many kinds of alchemical practices in Taoism, but they fall roughly into two categories:

- ✓ **Exterior alchemy:** The literal alchemy involving preparing and ingesting substances
- ✓ **Interior alchemy:** A practice in which alchemical formulas and instructions serve as metaphors for techniques of cultivating and transforming your body's internal energies

If you're especially interested in Taoist alchemy, check out Chapter 15.

Among the many physical practices in Taoism, a handful that have functioned somewhat on the periphery of the tradition have caught on big time in the West. Practices like *t'ai-chi*, *ch'i-kung*, and a range of other techniques that combine martial arts and spiritual teachings all had loose connections to Taoism in China, but they have, in many ways, become the primary faces of Western Taoism. And because of this, they get their own chunk of this book devoted specifically to them (see Chapter 16).

## *The ritual process*

Thinking about Taoist ritual may seem a little odd if you remember a passage in the *Tao Te Ching* where Lao Tzu seems to be trashing the performance of ritual. But ever since the beginnings of the Way of the Celestial Masters, various forms of ritual — atonement of sins, purification rites, ceremonies on behalf of the dead — have been hugely important in Taoism. When Taoist initiates achieve ordination or advance in priestly rank, they effectively receive authorization to participate in or conduct specific rituals, which almost always involve gaining access to esoteric ritual secrets. Many of the texts in the Taoist Canon actually function as guides or companions to these ritual performances, which is why they're virtually impossible to understand if you just "cold-call" them, but also why they're such a valuable (and understudied) resource for understanding the realities of Taoist practice.

Although most of the rituals have an esoteric component, many are dramatic and colorful, even if you don't understand what's going on. This is particularly true of rites of "cosmic renewal," some of which occur only once every several years, take days to perform, and include the participation of dozens (or hundreds) of priests. In Chapter 17, I try to make some of these impenetrable ritual processes a little easier to understand.